

Sermon: St Alkmund's Whitchurch. 24/7/22

All the parables of Jesus were meant to make one point. So when we turn to the Parable of the Friend seeking help in today's gospel what is the point Jesus wants to communicate? It is not the reluctance of the friend to help. Obviously in the story the friend represents God and we would be mistaken to think Jesus was saying that God must be pestered and cajoled before God will respond to our pleas and petitions. No. Rather the point Jesus wants to make is that we need to be persistent in prayer. We need to show God that what we are bringing into the divine presence really matters to us. We are passionate about seeing God touching and transforming the person or persons that we are praying for. What helps us see that this was what Jesus had in mind is the teaching which follows. Here Jesus says 'Ask...seek...knock'. When we look at the Greek behind those words in the Gospel text we can see that those commands are in what is called the 'continuous present' and that means that they should be translated as 'Go on and on asking... go on and on seeking.... Go on and on knocking.' Again they are an exhortation to persistence which underlines the teaching of the Parable of the Friend seeking help.

Most of us would probably need to admit that this touches a sore point. Most of us do not persevere in prayer. We tend, instead, to be rather spasmodic and shallow. Benjamin Jowett a former Master of Balliol College, Oxford owned up to this when he wrote:

'Nothing makes me more conscious of poverty and shallowness of character than the difficulty in praying or attending to prayer. There is nothing which at a distance I seem to desire more than the knowledge of God and yet for 2 minutes I cannot keep any mind on Him. But I read a great work of fiction and can hardly take my mind from it.'

Why is that? I want to suggest 2 reasons.

- (a) Because we do not care enough. We are not passionate enough about the needs of our fellow human beings. We all too easily grow a skin of indifference – start to suffer from what has been called 'compassion fatigue'. We are bombarded by information of so much that is wrong in our world that we do not have the capacity to respond. We feel overwhelmed.

John Henry Newman was made a Saint last year. Newman was generally regarded as a very withdrawn figure for most of his life – and not deeply engaged with other people. Yet Owen Chadwick in his book on Newman says that he had deep passions. If he learnt of a natural disaster that had killed 1000's he would burst into tears – and the same would happen when he learnt of a friend who had become very ill. On the other hand, when he received a letter saying that a friend had become Fellow of an Oxford College, he kissed the letter with joy. That depth of feeling is the kind that fuels prayer.

So how can you and I begin to get in touch with that type of prayer, which encompasses the needy of our world?

- (1) Start with those who matter – family and friends. When we pray for them our emotions are engaged – we feel the passion and it fires out petition. If we then move outwards from them perhaps some of the emotion and passion will carry over.
- (2) But we also need to be mature enough to recognize that prayer does not always need to be accompanied by emotion. We can use a set form of prayer like the Litany which

encompasses all sorts and conditions of people and seeks God's mercy and help for them. By offering such petitions – by taking the time it requires to say them we - are trying to say to God that this matters to me.

- (3) Silence – just being there in the presence of God can be a form of petition. Paul says in Romans 8: 'we do not know how to pray but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'. And if we cannot stay for as long as we might like – we can light a candle to express our intention and desire to offer petitions for the needy.

So the 1st reason for the lack of prayer is our lack of concern and compassion.

A 2nd reason might be lack of belief. We are not convinced that praying makes any real difference. If that is the case, then we need to consider 2 things

- (a) The nature of God. What is God like? Well if you read the 39 Articles you will read there that God 'has no parts and no passions' – which must surely mean to most people that God is pretty disconnected from us and indifferent to us. But such a description is based upon Greek philosophy not the Bible! The Greeks saw God as being far away from the earth and very uninterested in the day to day lives of human beings. But not so the Bible. If we turn to the Old Testament we learn again and again that God is 'full of compassion'. Abraham Heschel, a great Old Testament Scholar, spoke of the 'pathos' of God – and he said that that pathos meant that God is deeply affected by the life of the human race. 'We are', he wrote 'a factor in God's life'. We matter to God. And of course in the New Testament this belief becomes even stronger. With the coming of Jesus, the New Testament tells us that we are encountering 'God with us'. Alongside us. Immersed in our history. Part of our progress into the future. What is more when the earthly life of Jesus is complete, he does not shed his humanity like a snake shedding its skin – no, He, as Son of God, remains united with that humanity and draws it back up into the life of God. So for God – our humanity is now a permanent feature of His life – so that we are constantly the object of His perfect love. This however raises another problem: If God is like that – compassionate and full of love – why would prayer make any difference? God is already responding fully to our world and our human race – so what is the point of prayer?

The point of prayer is to draw us into a closer relationship with God – and a closer relationship with one another. Of course God could look after the world all by Himself. He does not need any assistance. But what if God chooses to have our assistance? Those of us who have had children have all learnt to make room for their contribution in the tasks we have to fulfil round the home.

A mother will involve a child in cooking – even if the final product may be below her usual standard. Or a father will involve his child in washing the car or planting the potatoes even if that results in unseemly smudges on the car bodywork and a few potatoes completely out of line with the others. The whole point is that the sharing of the task has brought closeness and co-operation – it has deepened the relationship.

And so it is with God. He wants to involve us in the expression of His love towards the world – so that we are drawn into a deeper relationship with Him and others.

As a boy I remember on a sunny day holding a magnifying glass just above a dry leaf. I watched as gradually a black spot, then some smoke – and finally a flame consumed the leaf. The rays of the sun had been concentrated in one spot – and suddenly everything was different! I want to suggest that prayer is like that magnifying glass. The rays of God's love are constantly pouring towards us and our world – but we act as the 'magnifying glass' – we focus that love on specific individuals or situations – we 'intensify' God's blessing – so that it has a greater impact. God involves us – and it is a great privilege to be involved in that way. And alongside the privilege we must recognize responsibility – God has given us that very important part to play in the fulfilment of His purposes for the world. That is why Jesus exhorts us to persevere and to have faith.

But how can we hope to fulfil such a role? We know that we are weak and that we waver. The answer is through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Looking across this congregation I can see that you will all be regulars in places like Waterworld and other leisure centres where there are swimming pools with fast flowing flumes and slides and features like wave machines! In which case you have probably discovered the Lazy River. Once you move into that part of the pool you suddenly become aware of a strong current flowing through the water and propelling you forward. You can now move much quicker and more effortlessly through the water. And if you have a grandchild with you you will need to move fast!

Well, when we allow the Holy Spirit to enter our hearts and lives – then prayer receives that same impulse of energy. We feel propelled along – the effort and discipline of prayer does not seem quite so unmanageable. We are given a deeper sense of co-operating with God. We are not trying to do everything alone and in our own strength. And so at the end of our Gospel reading (Luke 11¹⁻¹³) Jesus says: 'If you know how to give good gifts to your children – how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.' So start there. Ask your Heavenly Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit and then in his power learn to pray.

Amen.

Paul W Thomas
Archdeacon of Salop
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