

SERMON NOTES FOR PENTECOST | 20.05.18

- Last week's sermon full of content - about the **Ascension** and about **William Lambe** and his gift to this Church
- Pentecost often an upbeat celebration of the power of the **Holy Spirit** to do remarkable things in people's lives
- Very difficult names to pronounce in the 1st reading: **Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Phrygia and Pamphilia...** Look how people are able to relate in a new way with each other – a new understanding, a new language
- In yesterday's **Royal Wedding** the **American Presiding Bishop Michael Curry** talked about all that flows from the release of the power of love in the world and got rave reviews

- Today we take a step back from all the activity and try to recall what **Jesus** said to the disciples at the **Ascension: WAIT** for the Spirit

- Much of the praying that we do is done together. Our **Sunday Masses** have a recognisable shape and they are filled with lots and lots of words!
- We know that **God** speaks through those words and we will hear all kinds of things that we wouldn't otherwise think about; we will say words we wouldn't otherwise say

- But what happens when we are on our own – with perhaps just a **Bible** or a **hymn book** to hand? **What then?**

- **What is the state of our private prayer?**

- In the 2nd reading from **Romans**, **St Paul** says: *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*
- **Good place to start.** We can fill space with words and we can say all kinds of wonderful things. But at the heart of prayer is the fact that we can only pray with any degree of reality and truth when the **Spirit** is working inside us and forming the words we use.

- **Which means that the best start to private prayer is that word WAIT. It means sitting somewhere comfortable (Jesus talks about shutting the door so that no one knows what you are doing) and being open to God and to his Spirit.**
- **That might mean closing your eyes; it certainly means turning off your mobile or even Netflix! And waiting.**
- **Paul goes on: *And God, who touches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit works within his saints according to the will of God.***
- **The better our ability to let our minds stop racing away and to let the crises recede into the background for a while, the more chance the Spirit has to set the agenda and to put the things we think are important into some kind of perspective.**
- **Some find it held to be aware of their breathing so that it slows down to a more gentle pace; some need something to look at – a candle, a cross for example – to focus their attention.**
- **Some will find this process of slowing down is helped by having a few lines of the Bible to think about – or even a very simple prayer**
- **But the aim is to leave the restlessness aside for a moment – what St Paul means by ‘labour pains’ in this reading. We are all struggling - to be, to do, to achieve. Prayer is, first and foremost, the sign that we are not really our own Master and that we realise our need of the Spirit of Truth that the Father is only too willing to send – if only we will make space for him.**
- **At a recent quiet day, the speaker used an illustration which I found quite helpful. She asked us to imagine that we were in a hot air balloon. The fire was duly lit but, sadly, there was too much weight in the basket and we couldn’t take off.**
- **The question she posed was: what are the bits of mental and spiritual baggage that you keep by you – which is actually stopping you ‘taking off’?**
- **A) Can you identify what they are and B) can you find a way to say: I don’t need these any more – and I have the capacity to throw them over the side so that the air balloon can move off?**

- It isn't rocket science (forgive the mixed metaphors) to realise that certain habits of kind and life-style that we think make us comfortable, are actually stopping us being the full human beings that were 'made in the image of God'. They might be comfortable and even apparently essential.
- Our prayer life is therefore the channel by which God restores to us the balance and the wisdom that he gave as at the beginning of our lives which we have allowed to become weighed down with things we thought would help. It is a vital tool for de-cluttering!
- But prayer isn't a form of therapy – and just for us! It is the way God helps us to restore the balance with concern for ourselves and concern for the world that he made. Instead of allowing ourselves to be the centre of our own known world, the Spirit of God is actively shifting the focus from us - to other people.
- Another small illustration – this time a train. Some trains are designed to pull the carriages along and some are designed to push them. Pull/Push.
- Most of us find that when we are pushed to do things, we build up a level of resistance and resentment. On the other hand, when we get excited about something - because we are curious about it or because it seems to offer us something special, we use the terms drawn to, or pulled.
- Coercion rarely works for long but being intrigued and fascinated releases new reserves of energy we never knew we had!
- Prayer is just that: not something to be pushed into but a journey which literally 'goes with the flow', offering us new vistas and new opportunities – and all the excitement that goes with it. *When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you into all the truth.*
- But, you say, isn't prayer really about intercession, praying for others and their needs?

- **Prayer is often about offering God's care to those who need it – but all too often it can become a kind of religious coercion: we ought to pray for Christian Aid or the war in Syria or whatever, and we do it as a token gesture because our hearts aren't really engaged. What we give is grudging, part of a cerebral exercise of damage limitation with an element of guilt thrown in for good measure!**
- **What prayer does is to change our work for charity from push to pull: if I love someone I will do anything I can to help – giving without counting the cost.**
- **And I will still be content even if I know there isn't a single thing I can do about a situation because, at the very least, I can leave it in the hands of God. The great thing about love is the way it releases us from feeling guilty. As St Paul reminds us: *Love drives out fear***
- **That I not to say that prayer won't take us into some dark place sometimes too. But almost always to help us learn things that would otherwise have passed us by. What is the parable of Jonah all about if it isn't reminding us that time in the dark actually led him to an essential turnaround in his life?**
- **And that takes us full circle. My prayer will teach me what I can do and what I can't: and it will teach me to thank God for his ability to do things where I am totally helpless. Which is probably most places!**
- **So my praise of God is also a essential part of that time off, sitting comfortably without a huge agenda or a barrel load of words to be said. *Be still and know that I am God* is often a very good place to start**
- **It always seems such a shame to me that prayer has been sold as a very difficult thing to do – almost too hard for ordinary people**
- **Of course some people are better at it than others, and some are more disciplined at setting time aside than others**
- **But Pentecost is a very good time to look again at the offer: I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them all at once. *When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth.***
- **If you will give him time and space – and an open heart and mind.**