

SERMON NOTES FOR 2nd SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT | 19.11.2023

I Samuel 1: 21 – 2:2; Ephesians 1: 15-23; St Matthew 25: 14-30

- Appropriate that my last ordinary sermon is about prayer and liturgy. I was Liturgy Adviser for 10 years in Bradford and we have spent a lot of time making our worship at St James' as accessible and God centred as possible: with Jacob we want to say: This is none other than the House of God, the gate of heaven (Genesis 28: 17)
- Colin Dunlop, Dean of Lincoln "I want worship that will not just be understandable but will take me and my fellow worshippers out of ourselves and into the vast experience of God..." Sisters of the Love of God, Oxford: we pray at 2am because we are 'catching in the darkness the needs of those suffering when no one else is thinking of them'. Buddhist practice of looking at the four corners of the earth directing the mind to the inhabitants of each in turn – first with friendship, then with compassion – then with sympathy then with quiet confidence that, at some (unknown) time, all will be well again.
- That is what our intercessions do. Colin Dunlop: "We become impoverished if we live only in the present age and within the limits of our own personal resources"
- RS Thomas poems. In one: "Why no, I never thought other than that God is the great absence in our lives..." But in another: "then there have been times when, after a long time on my knees in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled from my mind and I have looked in and seen the old questions lie folded and in place, like the piled grave clothes of his risen body..." Our loving Father God knows best of all what we need.
- In Iris Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good*: Jessica is advised to let past problems ebb away: "Put all your energies into that and you will discover the unknown good which flies magnetically towards those in need." The old maxim: We need to let go and let God.
- Today about writing the words for our shared time of intercession: need to lay down some basic principles
- Starting with: 'Who is the God who is waiting for us to reach out to him?' What is God like, the one who waits for us? Why does he do that? What interest does he have in me?
- And the only place to start is with silence: the reining in of our busy minds. Prayer starts with a change in attitude. "Be still and know that I am God." Archbishop William Temple: "Prayer helps us most when we have stopped thinking about needs – our needs, even other people's needs - even our need for spiritual strength – and start thinking exclusively about God. There is nothing better for us than to gaze, to gaze on him." Emptying ourselves – in Greek: kenosis.

- But that needs self-control. We are not just involved in day dreaming and hoping for the best. Gazing, Wm Temple's word, is an intentional exercise: we need to be paying attention. It is being alert – but not in a hyperactive, tense kind of way. We are to be absorbed in that moment and for that moment everything else needs to be set to one side. *“What do you want of me, Lord”* as the familiar song has it.
- Good intercessory prayer takes that one stage further: as we ponder we are also resolved to act on what we have discovered. It isn't a matter of 'O, that's interesting' God is asking us to take what we have discovered and do something with it.
- And there is our framework. It comes in three parts: God - Situation - Action!
- Or in another little guide which may be familiar to you already: ACTS: Adoration – Confession - Thanksgiving – Supplication. We will come back to those.
- What helps me is to sit in silence. And when I have managed to capture that sense of focused stillness, I start to do some editing: what are the things that are most real at the moment; what are the dominant, pressing issues right now? As Archbishop Michael Ramsey once reminded us, we need to pray 'as we are' and not as we think we ought to be. I can't have a proper relationship with God if I am pretending to be holy, pretending to be generous, pretending to care about Gaza or Ukraine or my sick friend - if I'm not really that bothered.
- Often prayer is simply about turning ideas over in the presence of our loving God. And the more I look at the issues, the worries - using the Buddhist four corners technique, examining what's going on from all sides – and the more I feel able to trust God and ask for his help, offering the problems to him and letting go of them – the more I realise how much I need to pray. Remember the old saying 'Seven prayer-less days make one weak (with an a!).
- There is a pack of materials available for any who would like to try writing our intercessions: it includes these words addressed to all who lead worship *“Yours is a share in the work of the Lord's Spirit who gathers us from east to west to make an offering of praise to the glory of God's holy name. Yours is the task of calling us to remember God's mercy and our need of it. Yours is the voice that calls us recall God's holy word. So let every prayer and word you speak be clear, strong and true. Trust always in the Spirit but not too much in your own spontaneity. Anyone can read texts; only the believer can pray them...”*
- And so I try to frame my prayers according to those two models I gave you earlier: God - Situation - Action! AND ACTS Adoration – Confession - Thanksgiving – Supplication.
- I start by simply reflecting on God and all that he has done – in history as recorded in the Bible and in my own life – and I thank him for all of those things. When I look back on the situations in which I have been involved, I can then tease out the part that God played in transforming them for good.

- And the action bit forces me to admit the way I have wasted his gifts, hurt other people and missed opportunities. I am sorry for all those things – but I need to say so. It isn't enough just to be generally aware of my shortcomings. What did I do, and why? And that turns me round from being overwhelming concerned with me and so I thank God for all that he has done to break through into our grey and tired world and fill it with light, with love and with hope. My action is not to be content with my old self any longer.
- And then – and only then - am I ready with my supplications – the old word for asking.
- How does this work when we are writing intercessions for public use?
- All the same preparatory stuff applies of course. Silence in God's presence; waiting for his Holy Spirit to guide us through; being honest when thinking which topics are real to me and not just what I think I ought to be saying.
- And of course remembering to thank him for all he has done before I bring out the shopping list of requests. If we give him time and space God will direct our prayers and they will not only be the right ones to share but will be the ones that will lead us to do all in our power to bring those hopes into reality.
- Some practical tips:
- Read the Gospel (better still all the readings) early in the week. Let them roll around in your head for as long as possible. They will have a great influence on what you might want to pray for in Church.
- Take inspiration from stories like the one about Hannah in today's first reading. Feel the depth of her crying out to God for a child; imagine how she felt as she finally reached the Temple and handed Samuel to Eli. Ask God for a willingness to be as committed as she was. Or sit for a while with the Gospel and ask yourself what you have done with the gifts that God has entrusted to you.
- And when you finally get to writing the prayers (fewer and fewer of us are putting pen to paper I suspect!) make sure your wording is as easy to understand – on first hearing – as possible. Simple but precise words, shortish sentences. No waffle! No cliches: no *"I just want to thank you Lord..."*!
- Don't lose that framework: Thanking God – this is the issue – this is the outcome we pray for. Above all avoid generalities: We pray the people of Gaza is too broad: what people and why? And what do we hope for?
- And in that time of contemplation be open to God leading you to pray for all kinds of people, situations and life experiences. Read the papers, follow the news feeds. Turn these thoughts over before God and see what he wants you to ask for.
- Of course you will pray for the world's needs, for the Church, for friends and families and those in the news. But you are also sharing your own unique insights with your fellow Church members. Thank you for bringing them to our attention.

- There are lots and lots of resources available so that praying is not always just a matter of listening to words. Getting the congregation involved by writing or by some simple action is often really helpful – so long as it is well thought out and straightforward enough to take part in. The resources pack has some suggestions.
- Finally: these words from the meditation on leading worship: *“When your brothers and sisters praise and thank you, delight that you have served them in your leading of the prayers and rejoice in the work the Lord has accomplished through you. Be faithful and be humble, knowing that it is through you the Lord has saved his people.*