

Prayer 48 Reflection at Launch Service, 18th October 2019

Further words about prayer from 1Thessalonians, one of St Paul's earliest letters:

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5. 16-18)

There is something bold, risky and life-changing about daring – even for 48 hours – to 'pray without ceasing', as Paul bids us to in the New Testament. After all, we live in a society and even (dare I say it) a church which often forgets the power and importance of prayer. Prayer which, for Jesus & his disciples, was utterly central – the bread and butter of daily living – and yet today, so often, neglected to the sidelines: something vicars are supposed to do ("say one for me"!), something that happens when tragedy strikes, or reserved for ornate and well crafted liturgies. But this missed the point, because prayer – the Bible tells us, and Christians the world-over have discovered – is the most basic thing we do (like eating and drinking); and prayer – breathing in God's presence, and bringing our lives & world to him – absolutely changes things, and makes human life possible.

Listen to these words about prayer from James Montgomery's poem:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
Prayer, the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters heav'n with prayer.

So prayer ('the Christian's vital breath') & the desire to pray – often smothered or ignored - is utterly central to who we are and who God longs for us to be; and prayer is utterly at the heart of our response – through Jesus and the Holy Spirit – to the agonies and ecstasies of the broken world around us, which we bring (this weekend) to God in prayer.

Pray, and 'find peace within yourself', the Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov says, 'and thousands around you will be saved'. And that is what we will be doing, and desiring, this weekend, during Prayer 48.

So 'pray without ceasing', Paul says – and this, of course, is relevant not only to 24-7 prayer, but to the reality that all of our lives – our ordinary day-to-day human lives, rooted in worship – are meant to reflect a rule (or rhythm, in the ancient Benedictine sense) of prayer without ceasing. I love this translation of Romans 12. 1-2, about the whole of our lives being transformed in Christ, from the

Message Bible, which wonderfully captures that sense that (yes) all of our life is meant to become a prayer, as we draw closer to Jesus and allow him to change us from the inside out...

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.” (Romans 12. 1-2)

But there is, also, a special time and place for the sacrifice of 24-7 prayer which, alongside times given over to retreat or sustained prayer in response to critical times in our lives or world or church, God uses to bring change in the world, often in quite unexpected ways, we least expect. Pete Greig’s book ‘Red Moon Rising’ tells the story, powerfully, of how the 24-7 prayer movement around the world has brought powerful renewal and transformation in the life of the church; renewing ancient forms of Christian practise, including contemplation, the use of silence, intercession, Biblical meditation, and the use of creative arts – as we will experience, with our Prayer Stations, in a moment and throughout this weekend.

And in his book ‘Punk Monk. New monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing’, Pete Greig and Andy Freeman talk about how such 24-7 experiments (in places that they call ‘Boiler Rooms’ of prayer) has generated simple Christ-centred communities practising a daily rhythm of prayer, study and celebration, whilst actively caring for the poor and the lost.

My brothers and sisters, we need this kind of deep unceasing prayer; our church needs to rediscover this kind of Christ-centred prayer – through which God changes things, not least ourselves – and our world [at a critical point in the Brexit debate & at a time of acute conflict in the Middle East], as well as our parish (with its ever so real struggles & heart-ache) needs, more than ever.

Yes, prayer changes things; prayer reminds us that its God’s world and His Church, and that Jesus is active and working, through His Spirit, all the time, even when we’re too busy to notice.

So St Paul reminds us, writing (in a similar vein to the Philippians, despite his imprisonment in Rome) to rejoice, not to worry, but always to pray, offering prayers and supplications – on behalf of others, as well for ourselves), so that our requests are brought before God. Of course God know what we need before we ask Him; but mysteriously, praying for other people & for ourselves, seeking God’s healing, his transforming and his blessing, really makes a difference, as we enter the flow of God’s saving work. And we are assured, whatever trials or suffering we bring, that He will guard our hearts and our minds – our deepest selves – in the peace of Christ Jesus.

When I began sketching out thoughts for this address, I simply asked the question:

what happens when brothers and sisters really start praying in depth – praying without ceasing – and rediscovering (as in the Lord’s Prayer, as Jesus teaches it in Luke) prayer as the daily bread and butter of life?

Well, the answer is, of course, we discover – over time – that everything changes, and that prayer is much bigger and more fundamental than ever we thought before. For with God’s help, and increasingly devoted and open to God:-

- We begin to live more in depth, rather than at the surface of life, in tune with God, and discovering his true freedom;
- We begin to hear and discover what God’s word, spoken in our depths, is saying to us and how he’s slowly guiding us in his footsteps;

- We begin to see prayers answered, coincidences happening and lives transformed, as we follow his bidding;
- And we start to experience the world and the church, and even ourselves, as arenas of God's redemption, a foretaste of His Kingdom.

'Pray and find peace without yourselves – whatever the struggle that might be involved – and thousands round you will be saved.'

'Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' *Amen*