

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost 2017

How do you deal with technology? It is so very frustrating sometimes dealing with apps, and net banking, and blue teeth(?) and connectivity. Sometimes I am sure most of wish that we could rid ourselves of the whole shebang! But we want so much to be touch with family and friends... but sometimes you can have too much of a good thing! This technology business is insidious its sneaks up on us, it is addictive, it can take our attention. Have you seen couples in restaurants not looking into each other's eyes but into the screens of their iPhones? And if you're honest how much time have you wasted on your computer?

After the All Saints Eucharist last weekend I have felt the need to sing! Bach particularly has fallen victim to my warbling's this past week and so before, and after the Gospel today we heard the hymn "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme," literally: Awake, the voice is calling us. It is a Lutheran hymn written in German by Philipp Nicolai and first published in 1599, but it became the basis of one of Bach's most famous Cantatas, we call it 'Sleepers awake!' It is really an Advent hymn but although we have a few weeks to go, Advent is certainly in the air, we are already being called to watch out! Of late we have been hearing from Paul writing to the Thessalonians. These are the earliest New Testament writings and they have a real sense of immediacy about them. Those very early Christian communities were alert to the coming again of Christ. In today's reading Paul writes to comfort those whose loved ones have died before the return of Christ. Don't be uninformed he says Christ will gather up those who have died first and then us who remain. Later in the letter he urges his hearers 'let us not asleep as others do, let us keep awake and be sober!'

"Let us attend!" If ever you worship with our Orthodox brothers and sisters you will hear this during their liturgy. Before the Epistle and the Gospel the Deacon says, Sophia! Proschōmen! "Wisdom! Let us attend!" And again at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer, the Deacon again says: Let us stand well. Let us stand in awe. Let us be attentive, that we may present the holy offering in peace. The Deacon calls the people to attention. He calls us to attend, to listen, it is a physical, spiritual, emotional awareness of Wisdom in our midst. It's a call like in our Psalm (78) to take heed, to harken to the Word of the Lord. We won't be adopting these practises at St Philip's but it is worth reminding ourselves of being alert, being attentive. We are not on the edge of our seats waiting for the coming of Christ in the same way as the Thessalonians but we are still called to attentiveness in our own time.

It is very easy to criticise the use of technology in our age and I never do so lightly, because I benefit from it, as we all do. I am also wary because criticism of technology is often seen as a veiled criticism of the younger generation, for whom technology is as natural as...breathing! However there is a sense in which we are losing the ability to be attentive. Perhaps it

always has been the case that we are not good at being attentive - St Augustine, once confessed, "You were with me, but I was not with you" but I wonder if our distractions are greater today and I wonder if this reflects in our mental and spiritual health and well being. I have been reading something of the thinking of the French philosopher and mystic from the early twentieth century, Simone Weil. She once wrote:

"Prayer consists of attention," it is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable, towards God." These words come from an essay called, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." Weil argues that academic study is valuable insofar as it serves to develop a student's capacity for attention. She suggests that if we can nurture a student's capacity for attention, then they are beginning on the path to discover truth and in doing so are being oriented to God; she writes:

Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in humanity and the only extreme attention is religious. The amount of creative genius in any period is strictly in proportion to the amount of extreme attention and thus of authentic religion at that period. What she is saying is that we are most creative when we are most religious and we are most religious when we are attentive. Was it Bach who said that the notes just seem to come when I am attentive to the words?

All too often we try and learn by grasping ideas, sound bites, bits of information or knowledge. It is the modern way. But there also the sense of being patient, being attentive and allowing that idea, that wisdom to come to us penetrate us, by our attentiveness. I conducted a wedding yesterday, I'm in a romantic mindset - so I sense this waiting is like the beloved waiting for the arrival of one they love. Weil again wrote: "The attentive soul, with its lamp well filled with oil, awaits the Bridegroom's coming with confidence and desire." We are all students, to be a disciple is to be a student. To be a Christian is to be a disciple, and the mark of discipleship is attentiveness. We don't learn God's faith per se, we open ourselves up to God, to faith, we are attentive.

We cannot just 'Google' God or faith; I do wonder whether technology is stymieing our creativity and our attentiveness to each other and to God, I do pray that it isn't and it won't.

Let us pray: Keep us, O Lord, while we tarry on this earth,
in a serious seeking after you, and in an affectionate walking with you,
every day of our lives;
that when you come, we may be found not hiding our talent,
nor serving the flesh, nor yet asleep with our lamp unfurnished,
but waiting and longing for our Lord, our glorious God for ever.
Amen. (Richard Baxter, 1615-1691)