

Persistence in prayer

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Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15(16-19); Luke 11:1-13

You may remember that last week's Gospel reading was about active Martha, and contemplative Mary. Today's Gospel goes on to give us three lessons — the Lord's Prayer; the parable; and then those famous sayings. They are all about prayer though, i.e. fairly and squarely in Mary territory. Let's start in the middle, with that odd little parable.

Remember the story? An unexpected visitor (let's call him Victor the Visitor otherwise it's a bit hard to keep track of who is who) inconveniently shows up at midnight. His new host (let's call him Harry the Host) has no food to give him. So Harry goes to a friend's house (let's call this friend Ned the Neighbour). Harry hammers on the door and asks Ned for a loan of three loaves of bread. Ned, woken from sleep, tells Harry that he can't get up because everything in house has been settled down for the night. Is that the end of it? No — Jesus invites his listeners to reach the conclusion that, if Harry persists, then Ned indeed will get up, if for no other reason than because of Harry's shameless persistence. And 'shamelessness' is the real meaning of the Greek word, *anaideia*, which our Bible today politely translated as 'persistence'.

We modern suburban types may have some trouble getting into this parable — some cultural context is important. Harry the host's quandary was actually quite serious. In first century Palestine there was an almost absolute duty to give hospitality to strangers. Not providing a meal to visitors, even friends like Victor who showed up at midnight — was a shameful thing to do.

And Ned the neighbour's position was also more difficult than we at first realise because the normal Palestinian family lived together in a one-room house. On one side of the house was usually a raised platform where the family all slept; down on the ground were all their animals — a cow, perhaps some sheep and goats and so forth. Once you had barred the door for the night it was quite a thing to get up and unbar everything and it certainly couldn't be done without disturbing the whole household.

While we often want someone to reduce parables to simple propositions that show us how story X illustrates proposition Y, the best parables are usually more interesting, and subversive. If there is a simple conclusion to be drawn from this one it would be, I think, that if you have a genuine and pressing need, ask! An honest persistence, focus, a certain shamelessness are all qualities of a good prayer life.

That isn't a bad start. But let's tease out some of the nuances of this parable see how it works by using, and then undermining, the normal assumptions of its audience. If we look more closely, we see that Jesus is inviting his probably rather hard-nosed peasant audience to work their way through an awkward and disconcerting conundrum. You can almost watch them think: 'Now, if I were Harry the host, which is more important — the call on me to be hospitable to Victor, or the idea that I shouldn't disturb my neighbours once they have shut in for the night?' I'm pretty sure the audience would have quickly done the calculation and grudgingly admitted that that the duty of hospitality was the stronger so yes, they would have done what Harry did and woken Ned up. And now, 'if I'm Ned, what would I do if a friend hammered on my door at midnight as Harry was? Yes, it's try - I'd probably try to get rid of the rotter at first, but then, if he was my friend, and if he kept on at me, I'd have to admit that I probably would get up and lend him what he needed.' And then Jesus, who of course knows his audience very well, goes on to point out with a rhetorical flourish that if you, you hard-

nosed bunch of not overly virtuous peasants would get up, then how much better do you think your gracious and perfect God would behave? It's a very effective way of getting across the core message, and to get people thinking.

But embedded with that message are some other nuances. Such as the fact that not only was Harry's need real and immediate — it was to meet a duty of hospitality. If it had been for any lesser reason, or just to meet a selfish need of his own, I bet Jesus' audience probably would have done their sums the other way and said that no, waking one's neighbour up for that is just not on. Hospitality is a major, some would say almost the major, unifying theme of St Luke's Gospel.

Another interesting detail is that Harry (our host) was asking Ned for a loan — so while there is a sense that Ned is doing him a favour, Harry's request was framed in a canny almost negotiating kind of way that, and also had a kind of built in sense of mutuality. I wonder how often we think of prayer like that!

And of course it is also essential to this parable working that Harry and Ned were already friends — there is a pre-existing relationship. One thing about friends is that they can do this sort of thing to each other, and they can speak their minds. In fact, if it's not overdone it's probably this kind of thing that helps strengthen a friendship.

And finally, one of the things that really appeals to me about this parable is how vividly messy and real world it feels. We so often get put into awkward situations that involve choosing between the lesser of two evils re other people. When this happens, it's nice to know that being hospitable and figuring out a clever way to ask for help has been specifically endorsed as a strategy!

So our little parable that I first thought was about persistence in prayer in fact turns out to have a lot of other strands of friendship, relationship, hospitality towards other people, a focus on real needs, and maybe a certain sense of what might be called style ...

Now even if this is right, there is still the question of whether prayer actually 'works'? Do we actually get what we ask for?

Jesus' famous sayings that follow are not at all straightforward on this point as it turns out. He certainly says that prayer does produce results if you persist. But he doesn't actually say you get what you ask for. For example, he says that if a child asks for a fish, his parent won't give the child a snake. But he doesn't say the child actually gets a fish. The same goes for the egg and scorpion. These rather stark and surprising food images sort of imply that while you can expect not to get a nasty surprise, in fact God may well give you something that you didn't expect, but which is better. My experience is that sometimes I have received what I asked for, but it wasn't how or even when I expected. And it has almost always been better or when I was ready.

So if that is the case, what should we be praying for? What can we expect? Again the sayings are almost pointedly cryptic. Everyone who keeps on asking receives, and that everyone who keeps on searching finds, and for everyone who keeps on knocking the door will be opened. Searching for what? What is this door? Maybe that is the key trick of our lives — learning what to ask for!

I reckon this powerful image of a closed door opening is God opening up to us — or is that the other way around? Surely the reason many of us are here is that we are indeed searching : for meaning; for a sense of the divine or at least for a sense of connection to something greater than our little selves; to fill the holes in our lonely hearts; to learn the way of love, and

service; and hopefully for transformation. But do we actually find that depth? And if we aren't experiencing it, why not?

My experience is that prayer is the main practical way we have to deepen our spiritual lives.

Even if we pray for specific things in our external lives, if it isn't rooted more deeply, then we will find ourselves a bit lost without even knowing that has happened.

Benedictine nun Sister Joan Chittester has this to say about the relationship between the spiritual and the external, between the 'Mary' and the 'Martha' if you will: "Souls die from lack of reflection. Responsibilities dog us and tell us we're too involved with the 'real' world to be concerned about the spiritual questions. But it is always spiritual questions that make the difference in the way we go about our public responsibilities. Marriage, business, children, professions have all been defined in ways that keep contemplation away, but no one needs contemplation more than the harried mother, the irritable father, the ambitious executive, the striving professional, the poor woman, the sick man. Then, in those situations, we need reflection, understanding, meaning, peace of soul more than ever. Life is not an exercise to be endured. It is a mystery to be unfolded. Life comes from the living of it, from the attitudes we bring to it and the understandings we take away from each of the moments that touch our own." (see http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/chittister_4513.htm)

That spiritual awareness, that centring and divinising light, is what I think comes through the door as it opens. And that is what the 'asking' is about, in my book. But what did Sister Joan mean by that word 'contemplation'?

I hope you don't mind but for better or worse I am now going to talk a little about my own experiences and something that really changed my approach to prayer from the rather haphazard affair it had been for most of my life. I stress here that I am not trying here to set myself up as an expert or anything — quite the reverse! But prayer is by its nature personal.

About four years or so ago I came across (mysterious how that happens!) and decided genuinely to take up a serious prayer discipline. In my case it was a prayer tradition called Christian meditation. This was the rediscovery of a long standing prayer tradition that dates back as far as the desert fathers — the earliest Christian monks.

What this involves is finding a quiet place, and trying to become still yet alert. You then take a prayer word, a mantra, and then say it — or more accurately try to say it — inwardly and prayerfully for a fixed period of time. Perhaps the single most important instruction in the entire tradition though is that you do this regularly, one might even say persistently (!), with the strong suggestion being for at least 20 minutes each day in both the morning and the evening.

My experience of this is that done seriously, it is life changing. While initially counter-intuitive, the great thing about only saying one word is that many of the old problems with praying sort of go away. I don't need to find clever things to say to God. I don't have to stop when I run out of bright ideas, or for that matter feel guilty that maybe I haven't said everything to God that I think I ought. It becomes really clear when I am haphazard in my practice and when I am looking for excuses not to pray (which happens) — when I am being unfaithful to draw on that imagery from Hosea.

Instead, you are simply bringing yourself into the present moment, practicing poverty before God, warts and all, and building a relationship, but in a disciplined way — and there's the catch, we don't like discipline. But it's the discipline, the idea that this is a practice of poverty, and the context of faith, and that I am offering a gift to God, that makes this prayer rather than a New Age relaxation practice.

Contemplative prayer, which is the generic description for this kind of super-simple, silent, focussed way of praying, done regularly, can also be seen as way of practicing fidelity, fidelity to a simple practice, and a fulfilment of Jesus' instruction to die to self daily.

While saying a prayer word for half an hour sounds easy, it isn't — at least not for me. Let alone twice a day every day. Taking up this practice with that kind of regularity suddenly had me confronting some rather uncomfortable truths about myself. Like my priorities. Until then I had sort of thought that I was my own mind and I was largely in control of it. Nope. When I try praying with a focus on just one word for even a few minutes, I inevitably become very aware of just how distracted and out of control and incapable of settling down my mind really is. When I suddenly realise for the fourteenth time that I have drifted off to yet another memory, or daydream, or plan for the future and that I am no longer saying my prayer word, I do not, though, have to berate myself. I can just go back to saying the word. The mantra has started to teach me about persistence; and humility; and the nature of sin and how it works; and who I really am, rather than who I like to think I am. Its complete simplicity and focus is a foil to any pretensions to cleverness. It also provides a practical way of practising giving up control, practising love, and starting to glimpse the power and awe in holy silence.

Contemplative prayer has also been showing me just how much I truly need help in purifying this mind. I now see it is full of all sorts of stuff that has been programmed and conditioned into it by the world, and by my past, and by weird self images. And that is also surely a large part of what this spiritual life business is about isn't it? Finding a way of peeling back delusion and showing us reality, including our own reality? Of practicing giving all that away so that we can start to see ourselves as God sees us.

And while it's not always fun at the time (it can feel like trudging through a desert), the longer term effects of contemplative prayer are remarkable. It really is like Jesus' parable of a man who planted a seed which, being watered, grew quietly underground "how he did not know". Over time, I have found my perceptions of life deepening. While I certainly don't claim to be particularly deep yet (!), I am prepared to say that compared to what I remember of myself a few years ago I think I am on average now more integrated, collected and peaceful. I engage with life with more clarity, ease, centredness, with more natural intuition — and I hope with more humility and openness too. And ironically I also find that I often find myself also engaging in more traditional inner verbal prayer too. But these verbal prayers are often disconcertingly more integrated and heartfelt and, for want of a better word, real. The twice daily practice is one of those ways you end up dying your life, a bit like a cloth, with the cool, quiet, still, colour of God permeated through it.

Jesus of course is our model for how to pray. I can't help but thinking that the reason the disciples asked him for his instructions on how to pray was because they could see a quality in him that made them want to pray as he did.

And on that score, if you were wondering whatever happened to Jesus' first teaching of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel, it now won't surprise you that I reckon Jesus was teaching the Lord's Prayer to us a contemplative practice. In fact, Simone Weil, a French mystic of the last century, learned the Lord's Prayer in Greek by heart and used to have a discipline of saying it with total mindfulness. If she faltered in being completely focussed, she would start again until she was there. I know, by comparison, that I have a tendency to rush through it parrot-like, while actually thinking of several other things at the same time. Which is why I now tend to say it (often) as a series of individual prayers and try and focus on each in turn.

In fact, contemplative prayer picks up on all of the criteria Jesus said made for good prayer: In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said that our prayer should be done in a quiet place; that it

was interior; and that we shouldn't go on and on because our Father already knows what we need. And as we have heard, in today's teaching he tells us we need persistence — shameless persistence in fact (!), and focus. Bingo. That doesn't mean that we don't also open your heart in spoken prayer too. We might just end up surprised what we hear ourselves praying after a while ...

In closing, let me stress again that I am NOT saying that you need to take up Christian meditation in order to pray. But hopefully this does provide another way of thinking about our inner lives. (If you are interested in following up, I am happy to discuss and we have several other meditators here at St Philip's. We also have a (small) group that meets on Tuesdays at 5.30 p.m.) What I would say though is that if we are serious about wanting a spiritual life, then we need to have a serious prayer life. And whatever form of prayer life we follow, it is pretty clear that Jesus' advice today is to be persistent and grounded. We need to find a way of becoming, as St Paul says, rooted and built up in Christ, abounding in thanksgiving, knitted to him as if to our head. We need to keep on knocking at that door until it opens until, as our psalmist put it with particular poignancy today, we become a beautiful place where "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" and where "faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky". Amen to that!