

Lent Sermon Series 2014

2nd Sunday in Lent, 16th March

St Mary's Kidlington, 8am

Revd Canon Barbara Doubtfire: notes on *Prayer and Silence*

Today's scripture passages invite us to ponder snippets of the faith journeys of Abraham and Nicodemus....we read of the two of them responding to a God who beckons – “God is a beckoning word” –Gerard Hughes. – God as Someone. Both Abraham and Nicodemus are seeking...risk-taking ...challengedin the encounter with the Someone who beckons.

Nicodemus – a scholar and religious professional - seeks out Jesus,the human face of God – by night - taking a huge risk to engage in a challenging encounter – he's at the heart of the establishment and is seeking out the subversive....Nicodemus has connected in some way the signs which Jesus is doing with the activity of God and wants to learn more – he got more than he'd bargained for on that occasion!

Further light on his faith journey is conjecture...two further mentions...in a sanhedrin debate he appears to protect Jesus and later he helps Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus. The implication is that he had journeyed into deeper discipleship.

Abraham - a herdsman, challenged by famine in his native land to seek better pasturewe have the benefit of centuries of reflection on and much written about Abraham's faith journey. God said to Abraham GO – and Abraham went....He is obedient (Lat. obedire = to listen) –Abraham hears God....and strikes out taking the risky step of faith....and his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness ie in right relationship with God...relationship linked with listening to God and believing/trusting that God is faithful.

Today's Collect – we pray to walk in the way of righteousness – Abraham and Nicodemus in their different ways point us in the direction of right relationship with God.

So I start with the fundamentals -- prayer is the language of relationship with God - language consists of words and silences Think of our best relationships...we communicate, we listen to words exchanged and listen also to the silence when words fail – and we become aware of a deeper togetherness as we are listened to and silences aren't awkward but are the places where trust deepens. To listen with attention to someone we need to be still inside...and if we have experienced being truly listened to we have been blest indeed. It is the same in our relationship with God. The psalmist says “ Be still, and know that I am God”he doesn't say “Be still and know about God; he says “Be still and know that I am God”. ...an immediacy of encounter -linked with stillness.....the psalmist again “My heart has said of you seek my face; your face Lord will I seek.” Face-to-facewe respond to God's “beckoning, encouraging, look” Remember the french peasant when asked how he prayed said “He looks at me; I look at him.”Face-to-face ...

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore speaking of weaving silence into praying says “Lord, now it is time to sit face-to-face with Thee in this silent and overflowing leisure.”

But for me, as I guess for most of us, this sense of a silent and overflowing leisure is anything but silent and overflowing!...as soon as we've resolved to sit quietly and move into silence its as if the space gets immediately filled with our own inner noise... thoughts of what we've just been doing... of what we are planing to do, our uncertainties, regrets and fantasies act like a smoke screen, a dust of debate preventing us from entering into the silence and hearing God's voice - and moving closer to seeing him face-to-face. What to do? How can we purposefully learn to weave silence into our praying against all the background of distraction and disorder in our busy lives?

“Be still and know that I am God” – the psalmist is saying that relationship with God has the pattern of our most treasured and fulfilling relationships in lifeso becoming more still, slowing down, being intentional about taking life down a gear or two....walk....stroll.... into silence, is where perhaps we might make a start.

Take a walk round your garden in this welcome sunshine.....walk into silence....linger with the fragrance, savour the experience, marvel at a jewel-like drop of rainwater nestling in a leaf, listen to the dying sound of birdsong, touch the smooth laurel leaves....recall the awareness of this total experience and consider that the experience passes us by unless we are lingering and at leisure.

Now it is interesting that people who have explored weaving silence deeply in their praying frequently use the experiences which come to us through our senses when inviting us to share in

immediate experience of God – we are encouraged to look towards God, to receive his gaze and behold him; we listen in obedience to God to hear his voice in the depth of our being...in “the heart. Writers use the touch of God, savouring the sweetness of God, the fragrance of his presence to express something of that silent soaking in the presence of God which is our gentle, beckoning goad and our goal.

Here’s one example of very many....a woman was taking an autumn stroll in 14th century Norwich. A hazelnut tree has shed its fruit on the ground....she stops, and picks up a small hazelnut which she finds particularly pleasing and holds it in the palm of her hand “it was as round as a ball...her experience deepens as she reflects and responds....I marvelled.....it is all that is made.....God made it, God loves it, God keeps it...and her response God of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough for me.....only in you I have all”.....Mother Julian She looks...she marvels....she beholds A process which takes her into an immediate Encounter – and invites us into an experience for which words are totally inadequate

But how, you might ask, do I engage with this? How can I introduce more silence into my praying, and not simply listen to you talking about it, or reading the stirring insights from other peoples’ experience.

I find it of help to recall words spoken in my early school years by an exasperated schoolteacher to our unruly class --

Be quiet,- sit up straight - pay attention

Be quiet – begin to experience what being alone is like – our coming apart to make Eucharist together today is one expression of this

sit up straight – bring our body into an attentive, yet relaxed, place – attend to your body – it might have a message for you about the way you are living your life

pay attention - it’s difficult to pay proper attention – “We attend to God by not attending to anything else” – that’s another ha,ha statement!! That’s the goal....there’s much strenuous work hidden in that process...and in the world’s terms there’s nothing to show for it.

.We need tools to help us focus and pay attention. A useful toolbag might have in it:

- A bible with favourite passages marked in it for pondering(Ezekiel bidden to eat the scroll “Eat it all and fill yourself full – so I ate it and it was as sweet as honey “ – chew the cud)
- A book that encourages lingering and reflection rather than speeding on to the end of the chapter – that draws the mind into the heart as we “chew the cud”. We might be using the Archbishop’s Lent book “looking through The Cross
- A candle, picture, sculpture, or crucifix - something to look at as a focus which quietly draws us into many layers of meaning –draws us into gazing - taking our mind into our heart, into the core of our being and encouraging the experience of beholding
- A short phrase or a single word can be a focus for our devotion; the Jesus Prayer is a traditional focus of this type “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner.” – shortening as the stillness deepens and often using just Jesus – repetitively and slowly is sufficient
- Listen to a favourite spiritual song, a Taize chant or meditative music fading into silence... listen in the silence to near sounds - and to sounds in the distance (we can do this as we sit attentively here –now)...then we focus our attention within,
- The final tool in the bag – our breathing- become aware of our breathing, express the quality of this time simply by the way we breathe....our desire for God, our search for Him, our thankfulness for life itself, our hesitations..... “breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew” linked with the rhythm of your breathing.

A short silence to allow short practice of this movement into stillness using breathing.....

Distraction - “the biggie” issue --- distraction can be used positively and creatively. Name it and intentionally set it aside It can alert us to something we have forgotten to do – or to a plan half formed (handy notebook) mild daydreaming, sexual fantasy, awareness of a range of emotions – awareness of our body’s tiredness, often anger - frustration/boredom- the exercise is getting nowhere-is it worth time and effort? Then the other extreme...everything is warm and cosy – I’m making real progress and its workingthe temptation to become self-absorbed. When a time of intentional silent praying has passed, it is a great help to review the flow of the time (not during it but when ended!). Some key questions -so what? - What difference has it made? What were the dominant distractions? How did I deal with them? In the light of these questions, am I being

nudged into doing anything about them? Some people are helped to make jottings....others go occasionally to speak about their praying with a soul companion.

And as a final point, we go back to the fundamentals "What is this praying business about?... it is about being in relationship -connected ...connected to the beckoning Godpraying is connectionconnection to God...to self....to others...it can't simply be a self-improving activity to assure ourselves that we are in the higher reaches of mystical marriage, in the deep dark night of the soul, etc ----for prayer to be "working", regardless of the style of our praying, we must be attuned to its fruits - fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, self-control etc.... are we more aware through our praying of any disconnection in our relationships, our stewardship of natural resources, our political commitments and what are we going to do about it? The cistercian monk Thomas Merton from his life of much silent praying was through his writings and few purposeful encounters engaged in the '60's civil- rights movement in America. He writes of his life not as escapism from the world but as "listening to the world's deepest and most neglected voices....reconnecting with our inner integrity."

Prayer and silence can't simply be about our thinking and emotional life – it must unite our thoughts, feelings and actions. –it is measured by its fruits....

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you;
As you have called us to your service, make us worthy of our calling,
That here on earth we may find your peace,
and in the world to come, see you face to face.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Barbara Doubtfire.
March 16th 2014

Footnote:

"In this vision he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought "What may this be?" And it was generally answered thus: "It is all that is made." I marvelled how it might last, for it seemed it might suddenly have sunk into nothing because of its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: "It lasts and ever shall, because God loves it."

.....God, for your goodness, give me yourself. For you are enough for me and I may not ask anything that is less, that may be fully worthy of you. And if I ask any thing that is less, I am always wanting. But only in you I have all."

Revelations of Divine Love Julian of Norwich