

Lent Sermon Series 2014

2nd Sunday in Lent, 9th March

St Mary's Hampton Poyle, 10am

Revd Bob Whorton on *Prayer in Stillness*

We pray in different ways. And we are drawn to ways of praying which are right for us now, at this particular point on our journey - and prayer which is right for the sort of person we are. This morning we are focusing on a particular way of praying which is very helpful to some people and perhaps less helpful to others. Mother Teresa once wrote: 'God is the friend of silence'. This way of praying is about moving from the head and away from our many words, right down into the soul and discovering there a deep pool of stillness. I will give some examples of people praying what we can call this 'prayer in stillness' and I will link these to our Gospel reading about Nicodemus, who comes to visit Jesus at night. After this address I will invite you to keep silence for a little while.

It is evening time and darkness wraps around the village like a cloak. She leaves her husband watching the TV, and walks up the empty street to the church. Something draws her to the peace of this ancient building. Lighting a single light, she sits on a pew and settles down. She becomes aware of her breathing and as she breathes in and out, it is as though she breathes in the stillness of that ancient, sacred place. Her attention is focused now on the altar and the cross above it. She gazes at the Christ and imagines that He gazes back at her. In her mind she gently repeats the word, 'Jesus'. From time to time she becomes distracted and her mind goes to a conversation or a nagging worry. But she has learnt not to worry when this happens. She calmly, lovingly accepts the thought, and then brings her mind back to the word, 'Jesus'. As she sits in the silence it is as though she becomes part of Him and He becomes part of her.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Something drew him; something called him; some stirring of the soul, some dissatisfaction with the religion he knew so well. Perhaps he did not know why he went. Maybe he just knew that his soul was empty.

It is the middle of the day. He is a hospice doctor, and the morning has been very busy and quite distressing. A patient is still experiencing some pain, even though he and the rest of the team have tried everything they can think of over the last few days to help. This does not happen often thankfully, but it is always hard when it does, not least for the patient. He wonders again how much of the pain is because of psychological or spiritual dis-ease. In his office he switches off his phone, takes a Bible from the drawer and flicks through the Psalms. He finds himself reading, 'the Lord is my light and my salvation; of whom shall I be afraid?' Sitting with his back straight and feet placed firmly on the ground, he tries to centre himself. He listens to the sounds around him – the ticking of a clock, the murmur of a conversation in

the corridor outside, the singing of a bird It is hard to be still today, very hard. His mind keeps returning to the woman he has been trying to help. But he gently keeps saying the words of the Psalm in his mind, 'The Lord is my light'. And slowly the words begin to trickle down into his soul. For a couple of minutes he is aware of newness, of connection, of a peace which is not of his making.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus of a new birth, a birth from above. He tells him that he will not be able to see God's kingdom, he will not be able to experience God's reality, without this. This is a birth of water and the spirit, a baptism into a new world where he, Nicodemus, will not be at the centre. He will have to allow something to happen in him - so that Heaven can fill his heart.

It is early morning and she walks by the river. It is quite cold and misty, but she walks slowly, stopping often. She wants to see. She wants to listen. The Canada geese are honking to each other and she smiles, allowing the sound to penetrate deeply into her heart. She stops by a bush growing on the river bank. At the base of the bush the white blossom has fully emerged, but at the top there is only the suggestion of white, the promise of full glory to come. She stands looking at the river, noticing the patterns of light and dark on the surface, the morning shadows cast by the large trees, the ripples... She comes across a spider's web, bejewelled with countless tiny droplets of water. And as she slowly walks, her heart is full of praise and thanksgiving for the new day and for this life springing up after the long, long death of winter.

Jesus tells of a God who gives us His only Son, that we may have eternal life. This eternal life is now of course! Eternal life is life with depth, life filled to overflowing with God's love. Not just life in heaven which is to come in the future, but life now. In this moment, which is the only moment, we may hear the invitation to become still and find life, eternal life. We can breathe in God's Spirit who blows where she wills. We can be filled with life - we can experience that life. As the American Franciscan, Richard Rohr says, we can 'move from religion as mere belief, to religion as a new kind of knowing and a new source for loving'.

Let us simply sit in the stillness of this holy place for a little while.