

Lent Sermon Series 2014
2nd Sunday in Lent, 16th March

St John's Kidlington, 9.30am

Revd Clare Hayns on *Contemplative Prayer*

Just before ordination all prospective priests are sent on retreat for three days to prepare. In their wisdom the powers that be, (our lovely Bishops and their team), decree that this would be a silent retreat. There were 35 of us on retreat at Cuddesdon and we were to be silent during all our meals and in the main building. We were allowed to speak if we were in the expansive gardens.

The retreat group split into two.

There were those who loved the space, the peace and quiet. Who were totally comfortable in silence at meal times. Who looked serene and thoughtful, immersed in a book or in private contemplation.

And there were those who at any opportunity huddled in little groups at the bottom of the field in desperation for human conversation.

Which group was I in? Definitely the second. In fact I think I was the leader of the second.

Silence is not my natural state.

Contemplative prayer is, for some, the easiest and most natural thing in the world.

For others it is something we have learnt, grown into and grown to love and need. I am one of those.

It's hard to preach on this subject without being personal to some extent. Prayer is about our relationship with God and all of us will find different ways to relate. Some of us are chatter-ers and activists, some of us are naturally reflective and are wonderful listeners. And our personalities are of course drawn to different ways of praying, just as all of us relate to those around us differently.

So today I'd like to share a few thoughts as to why contemplative prayer is important and some ways that have helped me over the years, in hope they might also help you.

I'll use the term 'contemplative' prayer as silence may be a deceptive as in my experience silence is impossible – there is the noise in our home, of others around us, of our own thoughts and worries. And also in our contemplative prayer time we may choose to listen to music, or to say a word of scripture and so there will never be total silence.

Contemplative prayer is prayer that focuses on God.

I came from evangelical beginnings and still have a tendency to want to use three points.

When I speak about contemplative prayer I mean time spent being present to God, being awake to His will for us and being transformed and changed by it.

So, for me, contemplative prayer reminds me of three things. The importance of:

Being there, Being awake and Being transformed

Being there

Time just BEING, uncomplicated by clever words or liturgy, or by lists of things we'd like God to do for us.

Just BEING.

Life is so full of activity, rushing around from place to place, meeting to meeting. We are bombarded with images – on screens, phones, billboards, TV – everywhere. There are so many distractions. How do we expect to grow in our faith or deepen our relationship with God if we never stay quiet enough or focussed enough for Him to ever move or change us?

Someone on phone whilst at checkout. See in the face of the checkout girl being ignored. Children wanting attention. We are like that with God. Gadgets, distractions, busyness.

What God requires of us isn't all our activity, but is our attention. I have three boys and two are in their teens, and I value the time they chose to hang out with me. I don't need them to do or say anything in particular. We just enjoy being together.

The 16th Century mystic, St Theresa of Avila was asked 'What is contemplative prayer', and she said, 'in my opinion it is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves you'

Mother Theresa used to spend several hours in prayer each morning and she was asked what she does when she prays.

'I listen to God' she replied.

'Oh, and what does he do?

'He listens to me'

It's wonderfully simple and is all about relationship.

Contemplative prayer reminds me that I am fully loved no matter what I do, or say, or achieve. I am here. God is here. That is all.

Being awake

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk, writes that 'Contemplation is the key to being awake, truly awake'. Throughout the gospels Jesus often talks about prayer as being awake.

The last things he says to his disciples is he asks them three times to stay awake with him.

In our gospel reading Nicodemus was literally awake at night and it is in the dead of night that he goes to ask Jesus his questions about life.

When we spend time in prayer we become more awake to what God is doing in our own life and in the world.

I notice that when I spend time just being in God's presence, I find I'm more aware of God in the world – that can be hard as I become more aware of my own short-comings and sins, but I also become more aware of other people's needs, and I notice the beauty in the world around me.

Being transformed

In our readings today we hear about two men who were invited to trust God and to be changed. In the OT reading we hear of Abram who heads out in faith, leaving behind everything he knows with the promise of God's blessing. He learns to trust in God, to listen to his guidance and is changed by this.

And Nicodemus, who is told by Jesus that in order to truly live in God's kingdom then he needs to be born again - reborn. A transformation that he finds hard to grasp and understand.

Prayer changes us and I believe that spending time in contemplative prayer brings about transformation.

Personal examples:

Sense of shame at the way I've behaved towards someone. Someone pops into my head and after giving them a ring find they really needed a call. Deepening realisation that who I am isn't just about what I do.

Being there

Being awake

Being changed

Some tips that have helped me that I offer to you.

Take time each day, say 5 mins at first, to just BE. Find a place - a special chair, a corner of a room. Some find lighting a candle helps.

Some like to repeat a sacred word, such as the Jesus Prayer, 'lord Jesus, Son of God, Have mercy on me', or 'Yahweh' or like to take a verse of scripture to meditate on.

Music can help focus

I set a timer so I don't keep looking at my watch and hurrying on.

Don't worry about it. It's a relationship with God who loves you and just loves to spend time with you.

So now we are going to do just that. I have a piece of music that is 2 mins 50 seconds (for those who worry about time).

Just BE, focus on the music if that helps, or on a piece of art around the Church, on a window or a cross. You might like to open your hands in a gesture of open-ness. Allow yourself to be present to God, to see what wakens in you and have the courage to be open enough to be changed by Him.

Clare Hayns

16th March