

ROADSHOW 2015 – PRAYER 1

Ways and Means.

A few things to get clear:

1. Not an expert on prayer / not even very good at it. This is not just conventional piety, but I truly think I'd be a hypocrite to pretend that I was any kind of expert. I suspect that few of us are, but I for one am certainly not. (*It is, nevertheless, a real privilege as your bishop to talk to you about prayer.*)
2. I want to learn from you. - Groups terrify people / some people love them, so I'm suggesting a kind of compromise - After I've spoken, I will get you to discuss informally with people around you some of the ways you find you can pray – things that help you and then (if you feel so inclined – no pressure!) we can share some of that. I mean it when I say, *I want to learn*. I need to. All I hope to do is give a few tips that I've found helpful – hear some tips from you.
3. Tonight – *ways and means* / Next week – the Dean on contemplative / then a gap of a week and then the Lord's Prayer – are there ways we can pray it better?

1. START WITH GOD

Selfies – selfie sticks – the sticks that allow us to take pictures of ourselves with our smart phones are everywhere. You can't get away from them. Everywhere you go, you'll find people taking pictures of themselves in front of buildings or other places of interest.

Which means : ME (or ME and MY FRIEND) in front of the Taj Mahal or Big Ben or wherever. New development. What it is saying is, "This place needs me in the picture – it's not interesting otherwise".

Our prayers can be very like that. Fitting God into OUR lives. Nothing wrong with telling God how we feel / what we want / who we want to pray for, but we should remember that prayer is not just about us, or our wants or needs – it's not a selfie.. ***IT MUST BE THE OTHER WAY AROUND.***

I have found my involvement over the past few years with the Orthodox churches immensely valuable. SPIRITUALITY. Probably not made me a better person but I think it has made me a less self-focussed person. In the Orthodox traditions, discipleship is truly centred on worship – on God, not us. Orthodox worship may seem repetitive to those of us who are part of the western traditions of Christianity and it certainly seems long (until you get in on it).. It is all about the Presence of God – **Life in its fullness is about God / not about us.**

Archbishop Michael Ramsay (in reply to a question) once said that he had prayed for 5 minutes that morning BUT that it had taken him 55 minutes to get there! We can learn from that – we need to *take time* to recollect the presence of God. It's not about sending a shopping list in as short a time as possible. It's not that God is staying away from us – it is because we are too immersed in ourselves to truly reach towards him.

Isaiah 55. 6-9: Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So it is not that God is hiding from us, we are simply too self-obsessed to truly turn our fullest attention to him. Rushed prayers may be necessary sometimes, but if that's all there is to our prayer life, they're selfie prayers. Us, with God in the background.

Take time – think about *posture*. *Kneeling* should never be rubbished, or regarded as not properly or safely Church of Ireland. Kneeling is not grovelling before God. It is a physical reminder of just *who we are* in relation to God. God made us - he keeps us in being, in Christ he died for us – we are never other than in his debt. The Bible makes it very clear that there is nothing wrong with kneeling – even at home.

At other times we should try to make sure that the body is unaware of itself. Sitting – not slouching – sitting in such a way that the body and its muscles are utterly relaxed. Don't want to overlap with the Dean next week but sitting – breathing deeply and slowly while seeking to concentrate on something other than ourselves – a verse of scripture, perhaps such as the opening of the Isaiah passage I've just read, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;" This may be part of the time it takes to begin to pray in a way that is more about God than about us..

St Francis de Sales – the busier he was, the longer he felt he had to pray.

2. USING THE PRAYER BOOK (and other peoples' prayers) - not for everything but as a starting point. Particularly if your prayer life is becoming dry.

Clergy – don't let your parishioners lose the BCP.

Collects – the old collects are wonderful in so many ways. But they must be taken slowly.

They tell us about God – they do more. They relate us to God in true prayer. They usher us into his presence. We pray on GOD'S TERMS AND NOT ON OURS.

A problem is that modern English is not very good on relative clauses, and certainly not relative clauses that are attributive, without losing the flow. Tudor English – Cranmer's English, much closer to its Latin antecedents, could do it with ease.

Describe God – not for his benefit but for ours as we pray. Not all traditional collects do this but a good number do – a good way to bring us gently into God's presence. One of my very favourites – Trinity IV

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy..... We are nothing without God, however much we constantly think otherwise.

our ruler and guide..... God the ruler who sets the rules, and the guide who walks gently with us.

we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal how we live in this life is what decides our eternal future – we need to understand that every minute of every day, not with fear but understanding our responsibility to God.

(TRINITY 12)

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and art wont to give more than either we desire or deserve: Pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy; forgiving us those things whereof our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, but through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

God is always ready to hear our prayers. How often are we ready to pray? We pray that he will forgive us when we “in denial” about ourselves, but give us the things that we do not necessarily want, but which we need if we are to be true disciples – more than either we desire or deserve.

Don't avoid other people's prayers - least of all Cranmer's.. They may prevent our prayers becoming so “same-y” as to become monotonous to us, let alone to God. (Is. 7.13 “Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?” – Maybe could be said about some prayers! Does God find them as boring as we do!?)

3. BLEND YOUR BIBLE READING WITH YOUR PRAYING.

NOT opening a Bible at random and hoping God can speak to us through that. I mean a much less lazy approach.

Use a commentary – what was this saying in its original context? What is it saying now? What should I be learning from this for my life of discipleship?

Prayer and Scripture working together..

Don't be afraid of the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament. Huge richness there if we read it prayerfully and reflectively and intelligently.

Not a bible study but a very brief case study.

New Testament – screamingly obvious example – the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5. 8-9

⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

It helps to reflect on the original context – a crowd of people coming to hear the latest novelty – a Galilean wandering preacher, who was drawing crowds. What did they want to hear? Probably someone who would reinforce them in their own views. Someone who would slag off the Romans. What did they hear? Something which made no sense – turned everything they had ever believed upside down.

Reverse the beatitudes and be very afraid.

Not just to beat ourselves up over, but a way of setting our lives in a different direction.

Use commentaries / don't separate bible reading from prayer. Love God with all you heart, soul *and mind*. Nothing wrong with sudden inspiration but don't leave it all up to God. This is not faith –it's laziness. Jesus spent all night in prayer. Do you really not believe that this was about effort.

4. THANKSGIVING

No matter what.

Puts everything into perspective. Says it all about what we are and what we are called to be.

Difficult times as well as good times.

We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days

Two greatest temptations – self-pity and resentment.

Need to hold on to the General Thanksgiving in bad times – perhaps even more in the good times.

5. OUR PRAYER FOR OTHERS (OR OURSELVES)? What is it What is it not....

Never be an absolute demand of God.

Intercessory prayer is the most troubling aspect of prayer, because it does not always seem to work, or at least not as we want it – whether it is the instant arrow prayer or the carefully measured deeply devotional prayer.

Intercessory prayer is placing ourselves – gently placing those we love - into God’s hands, hands of infinite love and of power and of leaving them there in faith. Not always easy – we want definitive answers.

It is nothing to do with getting the words right or having enough people doing the praying. What sort of God would that be?

David Watson and Robert Foxcroft.

2 Church of England clergy in the 1970s into the 1980s.

David Watson a leader of the charismatic movement in the Church of England.

Robert Foxcroft a brilliant broadcaster and also a vicar. Both received diagnoses of cancer at around the same time.

Broadcast conversation between them (around 1982-83) :
One (David Watson) – fully determined that the prayer was going to sort it out. The other reflective (Robert Foxcroft) – hoping to live, but not expecting God to privilege him ahead of others.

Both died, happily both reconciled to approaching death.

Honesty essential – but not to fixate on the answer we demand – selfie prayers.

Our prayers must start and finish with God – *through Jesus Christ Our Lord* – not just a formal ending – that would be blasphemous. Taking the Lord’s name in vain. Christ who came into the world to save us – who died for us – who rose from death to give us the assurance of life in him.. We should therefore never be careless in using Christ’s name as a kind of sign-off.

Checklist for our intercessory prayers-

- Was the prayer thoughtful or careless?
- Was it unselfish or a selfie prayer?
- Was it centred on God rather than me?
- ** Do I truly want it to change me – in my attitudes..... in my priorities.... in my love and care of others?

Then we can say *through Jesus Christ our Lord*