

Sermon on Contemplative Prayer: Sunday 10th August

A story is told of a churchwarden who opened the small village church early each morning. After many months he realised that soon after opening the doors an elderly lady quietly entered, sat in the back pew and after about half an hour unobtrusively slipped out of the church. Having observed this event for a long while, one day he couldn't contain his curiosity so he approached the lady and inquired, 'Excuse me for asking, but I have watched you come in here day after day, sit quietly in the same pew and then leave. What are you doing?' The lady replied, 'I look at Him, He looks at me, we look at each other'. (Repeat)

Today we continue our August series on Prayer and our subject today is contemplative prayer. I wonder what comes into your mind when I mention contemplative prayer - candles, silence, monks and nuns, Gregorian chant? Maybe none of these but perhaps more a sense that this is something for a certain type of Christian, for people that like silence and perhaps for the more introverted amongst us. But our story at the start really puts contemplative prayer in its right context - like all prayer it is about our relationship with God. Contemplative prayer has sometimes been called the 'prayer of loving regard' and that is what the lady in our story had found. In most good relationships there comes a time when words are no longer necessary, when it is better to sit together in silence than to chatter away incessantly. It is often sign of being very comfortable in each other's company when we can be silent together. It is good to talk to God, to ask God for help and to bring the needs of our world to Him. Jesus taught His disciples to pray and we have the Lord's Prayer as an example of that. But in our Gospel today Jesus dismisses the crowds and then goes up the mountain by himself to pray. From evening until early morning he is praying - that is a period of several hours. Did Jesus talk all the time? Did He spend several hours constantly speaking to His Father and asking for things?

I believe Jesus spoke to His Father but also silently rested in the awareness of the Father's love - and in contemplative prayer that is what we do. We rest in God's love and *listen* to God. I guarantee that most of you here today have already practiced contemplative prayer, probably in this very building. Have you ever returned to your seat after receiving communion and just sat in silent awareness of God, or after the choir have sung an anthem directly after in those moments wanted the silence to last and last. Or maybe out walking and seeing a sunset or a beautiful landscape you pause and know you are witnessing something of God's power and beauty. Often in those times silence and awe seems to be the only response - we just don't want to talk because we know it would ruin the moment.

Now that all sounds very easy but often in truth our experience of coming to the discipline of contemplation can be a bit like Elijah's experience of God. Elijah eagerly goes out to meet God on the mountain but initially he is greeted by a mighty wind, then an earthquake and then fire. In other words a lot of noise and a lot of commotion. When we first come to sit still and in silence we experience the same - a lot of noise and commotion in our heads. Thoughts come and go, feelings fly around and the urge to go and have a cup of tea or make a phone call seems incredibly pressing. From its earliest days the church has recognised this reality and various methods have been used to help with the noise in our heads. One method is to use a word or a phrase that is gently repeated in the mind to give it something to focus on in order to bring our thoughts to stillness. An example of this is the Jesus Prayer popular in the Eastern Orthodox church where the phrase, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me' is repeated. Other phrases are shorter like the word Maranatha. In all these methods we are not trying to make our minds a blank rather we are seeking to relate to God beyond our usual thoughts and feelings. After a while we find that we are aware that as Elijah found beneath the noise or after it is a still, small voice - the presence of God. What has happened is that as we come to quiet we just become aware of God who has been there all the time but we were not aware of Him.

Another method used by Christians for many years is to take the words of scripture to help focus on God - scripture being one of the primary ways God reveals Himself to us. In the practice of

Lectio Divina, which means 'sacred reading' - a short passage of scripture was read aloud and then a phrase or word was chosen that seemed to particularly resonate with the individual. The reader then meditated upon that word or phrase turning it over in their minds and then turning that into prayer to God. The final stage was simply resting in God's presence beyond words.

I believe our modern world is longing for some of the silence and the calm that contemplative practice can offer and I think it is a huge challenge for the church to recover and make available these practices. Perhaps most of all we need to be aware that our culture has a strong emphasis on 'doing' rather than 'being' - on rushing rather than resting - we all feel the need to be productive and busy and contemplative practice provides a necessary balance to our lives and most importantly our relationship with God.

On a practical note ways in which you can nurture the practice of contemplative prayer. reading some good books on the subject I have a handout of titles you can look at, CD's of quiet music, attending Quiet Days or joining a support group such as Brian's Christian meditation group that meets fortnightly on a Saturday (perhaps Brian can give a wave), coming to a service like Sacred Space when it starts again. These are just a few of the ways you can develop contemplative practice.

To finish I would like to quote a verse from the famous hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

Drop thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace.

Amen.