

House of Prayer 2

Welcome to the second in our series 'a House of Prayer'.

Before we begin, we should acknowledge and pray for those caught up in the atrocity in Manchester yesterday.

Our prayer is one of empathy and lament; but also of defiant hope. Can I ask you, please, to stand.

A candle burns to remind us that light is stronger than any darkness, that goodness is stronger than all evil, that hope is stronger than despair and that love casts out all fear.

And so, without words, we stand in solidarity, in silent grief and protest, in prayer for those injured, killed or bereaved... and for those responsible.

Silence

Yesterday, we were exploring images or different ways of looking at prayer.

We were thinking of how God uses prayer first to change us, and then, through us, to change the world.

We explored how prayer can be life... how every action, every thought, every tear can be prayer.

We looked at prayer as oxygen; without it our souls and churches starve; prayer as glorifying and enjoying God; prayer as trapping the thoughts of God; prayer as a two-way conversation between ourselves and God; prayer as the mountain from which we glimpse a different perspective; prayer as cooperating with the divine will; prayer as protest; and, finally, prayer as gratitude.

Tonight, we begin with the question:

'Does God answer prayer and, if he does, how?'

Most prayers, of course, don't need an answer, but many do. We will all have, at some time, called out to God for help - even atheists do it.

The singer Nick Cave begins one of his most beautiful songs with the words, 'I don't believe in an interventionist God...'

And, I have to say, I understand why. In many ways, I would rather believe in a God who just doesn't, or can't, intervene than in a God who arbitrarily, only sometimes, does.

And yet, our scriptures tell the story of a God who becomes intimately involved in his creation.

So a question:

'Has God ever answered your prayer?' Turn to someone.

I think there are at least four answers to prayer - I believe God always answers, but it's not always the answer we want or expect:

Yes, I can help with this.

No, I can't help (my hands are tied) or, No, I won't help – this is not my will.

Wait, the time is not yet right.

And **depends**... it depends on other factors, other people, perhaps it depends on you.

You see, God did not create robots, he created free beings capable of loving.

And God has chosen not to interfere with human free will.

His tactics are much more about wooing, and influencing, convicting and convincing.

He cannot make someone do something against their will in response, even in response to prayer.

So often his answer must be 'it depends' – it depends on how you or others are open to this wooing... Are you willing to be part of the answer? Are you willing to change or forgive or help?

In speaking about answered prayer, Barbara Brown Taylor says:

'The meaning we give to what happens in our lives is our final inviolable freedom. Only you can say whether God answered you.'

She goes on to say:

'Are you still waiting for God to answer you, or is your life the answer you have been seeking; hiding in plain view?'

There are, of course, times in all our lives when we do not know how to pray.

Those are the moments when I simply imagine that person, that situation, myself being held in light.

Often there are no words, but sometimes it helps if we can find words.

Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martin in the Fields, asks us to imagine a moment after church over coffee when we begin chatting to someone and just as we are about to break off the conversation, that person touches our arm and says, 'Say a prayer for my dad will you, he's not himself, the dementia's getting worse, he's disappearing before my eyes'. And, at that moment, you realise you are standing on holy ground, looking into the fear and heartbreak of your friend's soul. And, instinctively, you say, 'Of course, of course I'll pray'.

But where do you start? How do we pray about such a slow burning tragedy?

Sam suggests that usually we pray in one of two ways:

The first he calls **The prayer of resurrection**; 'God fix this, override the rules of this world, step in and make possible the impossible. Reverse this disease'. After all, resurrection - isn't

this what our faith is built on? Should we not expect the miraculous? Isn't it a question of just having enough faith?

And a big part of us wants to pray like this, but we're afraid; afraid that we don't have enough faith; afraid of our hopes getting trashed.

The second prayer he calls **The prayer of Incarnation**; 'God, in Jesus you shared our pain and sorrow and sheer bad luck. Jesus, you were broken and desolate and alone with no guarantees. Visit my friend now and sit with them, hold their hand and give them patience and hope to get them through the day and send companions to show you care'.

It's a prayer I find myself praying often. It's usually as far as my faith can stretch. I cannot bring myself to offer hope that may prove to be false. I trust that the simple knowledge that my friend is not alone might be enough. And in praying, of course, for companions, I must be prepared myself to be a companion.

There is a third prayer, however - one Sam calls **The prayer of transfiguration**:

'God, in your son's transfiguration we see a whole new reality within, beneath and beyond what we thought we understood. In their times of bewilderment and confusion, show my friend and her father that they may find a deeper truth to their life than they ever knew, make firmer friends than they ever had, find reasons for living beyond what they ever imagined and be folded into your grace like never before. Peel back the beauty and strength of their true humanity, transform and transfigure from this chaos and pain something new, something good, something of life.'

There are, I think, few prayers as powerful as the prayer of transfiguration.

It's not the prayer of 'Fix this and take it off my desk', nor 'Be with me and share this struggle'. It's a prayer which asks God to take us up the mountain, even if just for a moment, so that we can see beyond and know a deeper reality.

I spoke last Sunday about the BBC documentary 'A time to Live', where 12 people shared their experience of living with a terminal diagnosis.

In these brief cameos we witnessed these remarkable, yet unremarkable, people discovering that they had more courage than they had ever thought; each finding a new wisdom for, and appreciation of, life. Each, despite the pain and heartache, found their world transfigured.

So, I want to pause there, because I am sure that we each know someone who needs the prayer of transfiguration; maybe that someone is you. So, I'd like to use a prayer written by Sam Wells, which we can, if we want, make our own.

'Make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory, a window into your world, where I can see your face, sense the mystery in all things, and walk with angels and saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I have ever been in calmer times. Make this a moment of truth and, when I cower in fear and feel alone, touch me and raise me and make me alive like never before.'

Praying with the senses

In the beginning, God spoke and the world was
Light and shadow, form and shape, colour and smell, sound and movement
Life in all its richness and complexity
He breathed and from the dust, created man and woman
And God's imprint was upon all he made
But only in humanity, was his image to be found
Imago Dei, every one of us - images of God
Literally icons of God

And when the time was right
The Creator himself became the created
The Word took flesh
The invisible became visible
The intangible, tangible
God with hands and feet, eyes and ears, his own unique fingerprints and voice patterns and smell
The truest human, the truest icon
Truly in fellowship with the Father

If we think about our encounters, our relationships
Only a few small percent of our communication is verbal
Our body language, our gestures, our eyes, our touch, even our smell speak louder than words
With our whole selves with all our working senses we communicate
but
Imagine a relationship conducted only via internet, with only written words or photographs
- loving only with our sight
Imagine a relationship conducted only via telephone
loving only with our hearing

Imagine loving, but never touching or smelling— as if through prison glass
Imagine loving, but never tasting the meals someone lovingly prepares
These would be relationships only half lived, half loved

Imagine loving God with all that we are, through words, through touch, through sound, through image, smell, even taste

That's the territory I'd like to explore in what remains of our time.

Now, usually we close our eyes to 'pray', but my invitation tonight is for us to open them, both our physical eyes and the eyes of our soul.

Sight

One of my favourite films is *American Beauty*.

Two of the central characters are teenage misfits living in dysfunctional families in a comfortable American suburb, where nothing is as it first appears.

The young man, Ricky, has a troubled past, and currently deals in drugs to fund his passion for making films; and he films almost everything he sees, including his next door neighbour, Jane. At first, she's uncomfortable about this stalker, but, over time, she learns to trust him.

In one of their first conversations, Ricky asks Jane, 'Do you want to see the most beautiful thing I've ever seen?'

The camera switches to them both watching a TV screen.

And, there on the screen, is a plastic bag dancing in the wind.

'It was one of those days when it was minutes away from snowing. And there's this electricity in the air. You can almost hear it, right? And this bag was just... dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For 15 minutes. That's the day I realised that there's this entire life behind things and this incredible benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid... ever.'

When you see something like that. It's like God looking right at you, just for second. And if you're careful, you can look right back.'

'And what did you see?', asks Jane.

'Beauty'

Some of you will be familiar with the work of Dennis Potter, the playwright of *Singing Detective* fame.

I don't know if you saw his last interview with Melvyn Bragg before he died.

He was very near the end of his fight against cancer. Occasionally, he would have to stop filming to take liquid morphine.

In one of his most lucid moments he says this:

'Below my window where I'm working, at this season the blossom is out in full now... it's a plum tree. It looks like apple blossom but it's white, and, looking at it, instead of saying 'Oh that's nice blossom'... last week looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that ever there could be, and I see it. Things are both more trivial than they ever were, and more important than they ever were, and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter. But the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous, and if people could see that, you know. There's no way of telling you, you have to experience it, but the glory of it, if you like, the comfort of it,

the reassurance... the fact is, if you see the present tense, boy do you see it. And boy can you celebrate it.'

God speaking through a plastic bag, blossom in a tree.

Epiphanies, moments when the eyes of our souls open and we see.

We see the present tense.

This beauty, this 'nowness', this comfort and reassurance, this life behind things, this benevolent force.

God is always communicating if only we slow down to look.

Although neither the writer of *American Beauty* or Dennis Potter might have known it, they were both talking about what Christians sometimes call **the sacrament of the present moment**

A sacrament, you'll know, is an outward visible sign of God's presence and love.

We live in a sacramental universe where God communicates his grace through the tangible and the visible as much as through the intangible and invisible.

Everything is alive with God, if only we could see.

Beauty, grace everywhere.

But we have to learn to stop, to look.

In Christian worship, particularly in the Orthodox Church, Icons are usually images of saints or holy people, or events from the gospels, used as windows onto eternity. In itself it is as visible and real as anything in everyday life, but it also reveals another invisible dimension. These traditional icons are not intended to be works of art, but mediums, means. Channels for prayer.

They're not worshipped, they're venerated. That is, they're treated with reverence because they point us to God.

Rowan Williams tells us that icons point the way, invite us to follow a journey, to engage in a pilgrimage. They help us cross borders to enter a new and transfigured world.

They're like a threshold in other words.

Where we can glimpse, or even enter, that greater reality of the Spirit world.

This is a contemporary icon.

It's a variation on the pieta – you might know the Michelangelo statue of the pieta, Mary holding the limp dead body of her son, after he has been taken down from the cross.

I'm not going to say any more about this one except to give you its title.

It's called 'The AIDS pieta'.

I'm going to leave you with this image for a few minutes, during which time I invite you again to just sit and wait with it, and ask, 'What is God saying to me through this?'

'What can I glimpse through this window into God?'

Frances Meigh

The young man with AIDS, a modern day Untouchable, rests in the arms of Jesus.

In the background is the cross, upon which Jesus stretched out his arms to all those who are expelled.

In scripture, we are reminded that we are the body of Christ. Here, where traditionally Christ's body lies, is someone with AIDS.

The Body of Christ has AIDS.

Touch

One of the most powerful ways in which we touch God, and God touches us, is through the touch of others; a held hand, an embrace, sometimes, perhaps, through what we call the laying on of hands.

This is where one person lays their hands upon another's head or shoulder, and asks that God would channel his love and healing for that person through the prayer of touch.

It's often associated with healing and with blessing and with commissioning, and often comes with an anointing with oil.

An anonymous quote:

'People throughout the ages have known what many of us are reclaiming – the things we touch and see can bring the unseen near.'

Over the centuries, Christians have used touch to bring the unseen near; from touching their forehead to an icon, to praying the bead or rosary.

Brendan O'Malley says:

'The repetitive prayer used when praying with rosaries acts as an anchor with which we focus the thoughts and still the mind, helping the person praying to remain at the still point where true prayer is to be found in the cell of the heart.'

The word 'rosary' is thought to be derived from 'garland of roses'; the string of prayers. A Rosarium is a rose garden; a place for contemplation. Sometimes beads are actually made from crushed roses, which give off an aroma.

The word 'bead' or 'bede' means prayer, and each bead represents a prayer.

The last thing I want to show you is a holding cross.

It's made of wood and is designed to be held in the palm of the hand.

Simply to hold something like this is in itself a prayer.

A lady I knew in my last parish, who had a history of mental illness following the death of her son, used to take one everywhere, sleep with it under her pillow, hold on to it when the pain and anguish felt too much.

As she held, it held her.

Each of you will, I hope, be in possession of a stone. Can I ask you to take it in your hand.

We're going to use these stones to help us to pray.

So can I now ask you to close your eyes.

Take a moment to feel its contours and shape, its weight and temperature.

What I hold in my hand is as old as me and older

As old as my name, my language, my culture

And older

As old as the soil

As old as the sea

And older

As old as the earth

As old as the sun, moon and stars

But younger than God

For God made this stone

Made and meant its colour

Its contours, its journey from below to above

And had earth never revealed it

And had I never admired it

It would still bear witness

To God's deep intention to make the world

Mean the world

Want the world

And one day, walk the world

And hold in his hand, what I now hold in mine

Imagine now that the stone you are holding is whatever is heavy in your life at this time.

Maybe you feel the weight of loss or loneliness; the weight of concern or conscience.

Silence

Now imagine that God is asking.

Will you let me hold this with you? Will you for a moment let me share its weight?

Consider this invitation – are you willing, are you ready to let God hold this with you?

If you are, in your own time hand it to him by placing it in front of you, on the ground or on the pew.

How does that feel, to share this with God?

In the silence, listen; does God want to say anything to you? Maybe in picture language, maybe in a thought that stirs within you?

In a moment it will be time to take back the stone.

But this time God is also offering himself; the ground of your being, the rock beneath you, the anchor of your soul.

So, as you take that stone again and hold it
Let it be a reminder of his steadfast love and faithfulness
This stone is a gift from God to you
To take away with you
A reminder of his forever holding

In a moment, when the bell rings, it will be time to open our eyes.

Hearing

We've talked a lot about listening to God; how he speaks often through the voice of another, or within our conscience, through scripture perhaps, or through an image in our mind's eye, through one of those 'godindicences' that Mary and Keith spoke about last night.

What about our physical hearing; how might that help us to pray?

Play track from Le Mystere des voix Bulgares

Don't you think it was interesting that we didn't have to know what was being said in the Bulgarian song for it to be meaningful?

Music can transport us – can draw us into prayer.

For some, singing is as St Augustine once said, 'praying twice'.

Another powerful form of prayer is speaking in tongues; a heavenly language not learned, where the Spirit prays through us.

If you want to know more about that have a word with me sometime.

There is great value to learning words by heart. When we have our service for those living with dementia, often there is no response until I begin the words, 'Our father, who art in heaven', and suddenly they are here, praying along or singing along to a hymn that unlocks something deeply buried.

Words memorised become a treasure mine from which to draw in more difficult times.

Taste and smell

What's your favourite taste and smell, and can you say why?

Taste and smell are intimately related, as you know.

One of the most obvious prayers of taste comes when we remember with wine and bread, the body and blood.

This, for many, is the most intimate moment of communion with God. Many sense something of the real presence of Christ in these ordinary things.

In the incarnation, God took human skin and still he continues to reveal himself through elements – bread, wine, water, fire, earth, incense...

Just as we watch the smoke rise, so we are reminded of prayer rising to God.

Just as the incense has a sweet smell, so we are reminded that to God our prayers are sweet.

The Psalms are full of images of taste.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

And that goodness is often associated with honey – the sweetness of God and banquets of wonderful food – the extravagant generosity of God.

But they also speaks of the opposite.

Hunger and thirst for a sense of God's presence.

The bitterness of tears.

The bitter herbs used in the Passover meal to symbolise the pain of a people's history.

We can use these senses in our prayers.

By slowing down to really taste our food, give it our full attention, savouring each mouthful, we learn a new gratitude.

When we taste something bitter, we can use that moment to call to mind the bitterness of life; something salty, we can remember our tears or the tears of others.

When we taste something sweet, we can remember the sweetness of life.

Tomorrow we will consider the sixth sense, the imagination.

Whichever way we turn, O God, there is your face
In the light of moon and patterns of stars
In scarred mountain rifts and ancient groves
In mighty seas and creatures of the deep.

Whichever way we turn, O God, there is your face
In the light of eyes we love
In the salt of tears we have tasted
In weathered countenances east and west
In the soft skin glow of the child everywhere.

Whichever way we turn, O Lord, there is your face, There is your face among us.