

Sermon on Wednesday 19 May 2021

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Arrow prayers and darts of faith

As you know, in the Liturgical Calendar, we are between Ascension Day, which we celebrated last Thursday, and Pentecost, which we celebrate this coming Sunday. So this morning, I thought I would ignore both of those events and talk about something completely different.

I want to say something briefly about prayer, starting by highlighting that today is the feast day of St Dunstan. There is a connection!

St Dunstan was quite a high-profile Bishop in his day. But, behind his main achievements, he was consistent in quietly re-establishing monastic orders in England that remained for centuries and are more or less intact today. He valued the purpose of prayer and the importance of creating centres of prayer.

Dunstan lived in the final epoch of Anglo Saxon Britain around 900AD, when the country was divided into seven separate kingdoms. He is remembered for not only restoring monastic life in England and reforming the English Church but also for serving as an important minister of state to several English kings.

He had his ups and downs, mostly because he spoke the truth and didn't hold back when he thought something needed saying. He often upset the hierarchy of English nobles because he found favour with a succession of monarchs. On one occasion the nobles of the king's court got so jealous of him that they trumped up charges of witchcraft and black magic against him and, when the king subsequently suggested he leave the court, the so-called

nobles beat him up and threw him in a cesspit. Not a pleasant experience.

But he continued to rise up through the ranks of the Church and was successively Abbot of Glastonbury Abbey, Bishop of Worcester, Bishop of London and finally Archbishop of Canterbury. In the end, however, he spoke the truth once too often. Officiating at the coronation of Ethelred the Unready in 978AD, he expressed his disapproval about how Ethelred had murdered the previous King, Edward. That, unsurprisingly, signalled the end of Dunstan's career as a royal advisor and he retired to Canterbury for the last 10 years of his life, always in fear that he would meet a premature end. There, despite the worry of his circumstances and the pressure of his workload, his days consisted of long hours, day and night, spent in private prayer.

In the first reading this morning, we heard about Daniel, and there's something that connects Daniel and St Dunstan and, in fact, to other high achievers in the Bible, such as, for example, Joseph - they are dedicated to prayer; they invite God into every aspect of their lives, every action, every decision, every meeting, every problem, every major speech or presentation, everything is run past God.

I'm sure we have all known - and know now - people who quietly build prayer into the very fabric of their lives. Perhaps they have the sort of relationship with God that allows them to have a constant conversation with Him in prayer.

It's something that I aspire to and perhaps you do, too.

The problem for me, and many people, is that those aspirations are often compromised by 'life'. It's a cruel irony for many of us that the very things that we should be discussing with God on an hour-by-hour or daily basis, are the things that prevent us

praying; the stuff of our lives, the busyness of our days. Daniel and Dunstan didn't let that happen. Daniel went to his room three times a day to pray. It got him into trouble but he continued to prioritise prayer.

I don't mind confessing that, at the moment, I am spinning a lot of plates in life, as they say. Not all the plates are problems but spinning them is time consuming - work, family, health - the usual things that we all experience, but they're all piling up at the same time. It's just one of those phases.

Don't worry, I'm ok. But what I've noticed, in this phase of pressure, when I should be praying more than ever, I'm squeezing prayer time into a corner and neglecting it more than I'd like. Some of you will have heard me refer to the personal diary that I've kept for over 50 years. This shares the same problem: when I'm busy doing interesting things worth writing about, I don't have the time to write, because I'm busy doing interesting things.

What's the answer regarding prayer?

I've decided to keep my prayers simple. Go back to basics. Refer to our gospel reading this morning from Luke: Christ instructs his disciples how to pray. His prayer, which is known as the Lord's Prayer, is just a series of bullet points:

- God, you're great;
- May your will be done;
- Give us what we need;
- Forgive us our wrongdoings;
- Help us to forgive other people theirs;
- And don't judge us too harshly;
- Thank you. Amen

Simple and to the point.

So, what I've been doing when I'm time poor is breaking my prayers into small chunks and spreading them throughout the day. I try to start each day with a Bible reading but gone is the long list of petitions that I used to present to God every morning. That has been replaced, like the news on the radio or TV, into sound-bite items when I'm sitting on the train or walking to the shops or driving up to Nottingham in the car.

I think God knows what we are going to pray about before we say the words and I've always believed that He answers even the prayers that we don't say (although he does like us to ask for the things that we want and not take his grace for granted). I'm sure He knew what Daniel was going to pray about as he entered the den of lions (fairly obvious, that one).

But sound-bite prayers are the answer for me in the short term. Perhaps you do this already. Sometimes God gives me the space to pray at length but when he doesn't, I know He understands and



accepts what I might call 'arrow' prayers or darts of faith. It is becoming a constant conversation and I'm reminded of David's Psalm 16 verse 8: *I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*

Amen