

Sermon Series Lent 2017: *living well* – Prayer and Study

Readings: Philippians 4: 4-9, Matthew 7: 24-29

Today we start this sermon series on our *Living Well* document which I hope you all have had and begin to work on. Today's text will be available with questions and discussion points specifically for the Home Groups which will be using this material through Lent.

This talk follows on from my colleagues' presentations: Sue last summer on Prayer – still available on the CCN website if you missed it and the recent All Age service with Rosemary and Julian in which two great examples of prayer techniques – for want of a better word were flagged up – the use of the fingers as symbols of areas to pray for and the Ignation *Lectio Divina*. We talk a lot about prayer, and in our various services hopefully practise what we preach in many different ways. In worship together we have quiet liturgical, loud liturgical, vibrant praise and meditative worship – Taizé, Celtic and so on. For private devotions we have the Prayer Chain and Morning Prayer as well as suggestions on our, and other websites.

It is clear to me that our prayer life is closely allied to our personality, and our theology, so that for some quiet is essential, for others it's the quality of language that reflects our devotion, for yet others, our response to God's grace will be noisy and boisterous. Some of us can multi-task – yes even me! - and pray whilst physically active – swimming, walking, jogging – may be drawing the line at rugby, or even watching England do their level best to lose matches!

As Sue reminded us, there is no right way to pray. Prayer is aligning our minds and spirit with the creator, reflecting on Jesus, recalling those in need, praising God for good things we have experienced and sometimes – yes sometimes railing against God for what has gone wrong in our lives or the lives of our family and friends – note the tone of some of the psalms!

However, we cannot just ask for things. The father image of God must be limited, sometimes the mother image is preferable, reminding us of the one who, right from the beginning, cares for us, supports us and sometimes says "No". Parents don't always give us what we ask for; they know better and lead us in a different direction.

Section 1 of our Living Well booklet gives us a clear outline for daily, weekly, monthly and annual responses to the call to prayer. We note the verse from Philippians: “ ... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” This verse reminds us that we cannot ask until we have reflected on our relationship to God and the way we have acted in the light of Jesus’ example. Recently we were reminded of the old Sunday School pattern of ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication (asking for things). This is a sound pattern and one broadly followed in all Anglican liturgy.

What of study? I agree with Rosemary that prayer and study must go together, but I want to suggest that study is a much bigger issue than merely reading a bit of the Bible daily, using Bible notes or a good commentary. These are essential for growth but by no means everything. There is so much material out there that we need to broaden our response to study, by reading both fiction and non-fiction, by reflecting on social issues, by using and responding to the senses.

I believe that whatever our intellectual or academic background we are called to use our minds to focus harder on our spiritual life. I will always remember a comment made by my tutor on my LLM course. She very tactfully expressed concern at one of my students, saying that (s)he never read anything that wasn’t “religious” and that for him/her the Bible had become a sort of idol which (s)he worshipped unthinkingly. Study of the Bible is vital, and we need always to read good commentaries which give us clear background and context. There is a great deal of very poor material out there, particularly online and we would do well to check the pedigree of websites before study. There is so much disagreement amongst scholars and so many different interpretations of the books of the Bible that we tend to take texts as they are without striving to get to the bottom of them. Almost all scholars will tell you, for instance, that the first Gospel, Mark, was written at least 40 years after Jesus’ life and death and that each evangelist was writing for a very specific audience, reflecting on what the mission of Jesus might mean in that community. Yet we treat the gospels as biographies and then can get bogged down in the very obvious contradictions to be found in them which actually are the result of stories passing among the different church communities with

different emphases and theological points being made. We know that four eye witness accounts of an accident or crime will result in four different accounts and we must draw out the truth from them.

Much of our understanding of the Christianity may well rest on stories which are meant as pointers to faith and truth rather than historical events. We need to understand something of the way that people in Old Testament and the early Christian era thought. I believe we will then need to ask that question so familiar to students of the Bible and Christianity: "What must that story / event mean to us today if it meant that to them then?" It seems to me to be a very important question if we are to understand and speak to people today who are used to facts, evidence and cause and effect. So many of our sermons seem to me to rely on that unwritten assumption of biblical truth, but we do not ask what is truth? Divine inspiration is not inerrancy.

I would wish to add a further thought, going back to my tutor's comment. We urgently need to integrate all our thinking, our senses, our reading, our activities with our Christian lives. We used to say "Church isn't just for Sunday" and that is, I trust, widely accepted in a church community that has to balance worship with family activities, work, shopping and so on. I think we need to follow the news, get involved in campaigns, demonstrations, stand up for justice and peace, reject exploitation, corruption and the dominance of finance in our lives. We are called to love our neighbours, and as Jesus clearly showed in the story of the Good Samaritan, our neighbour may well be of a different race, creed, colour. "We take that for granted" you might say, but I wonder. We still have our stereotypes, not based on experience but on prejudice. The more we reflect on society and stand up for our neighbours, our communities and our world, the closer we come to understanding what Jesus was all about.

Prayer and study is vital if we are to move beyond the idea of Jesus as our personal saviour and put into practice the sort of altruistic behaviour of which we read in Matthew 25: feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and so on.

If we apply ourselves to pray at all times and in all places, as Paul exhorts, rather than think of it as a short period of quiet in our homes or church – which of course may well be part of our practice – we will come close to that

man who, in today's gospel parable, built his house of faith on firm foundations. The C of E has recognised for a long time that a practical and meaningful religious life is based on four pillars: the Bible, tradition, reason and experience. And we need to reflect on each of these and keep a balance which the Holy Spirit will help us discover if we do our part.

Christ Church aims to be the Living Well which points us in the right direction for us to live well across the whole spectrum of our lives. To sum up our Philippians reading today: Trust in God, but apply your minds, body and spirit to your actions.