

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 21st June 2015

Trinity 3 / Proper 7

PRAYER II – 'This is the Word of the Lord'

1 Samuel 17:32-49

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

do you enjoy cookery contests like Ready, Steady, Cook or Masterchef? my favourite challenges are where they're given a miscellaneous collection of ingredients and have to make a coherent meal out of them; today's sermon preparation felt a bit like that: so many disparate elements, all to be brought together under the heading of 'prayer'

this is the second of a series of four on prayer, based on a little book by Henri Nouwen ('With Burning Hearts') and following the shape of the Communion service; the idea is to connect ordinary life with our prayer and worship, both on a Sunday morning and during the week

alongside that theme we have the invitation to complete 'prayer-leaves' with our thoughts on prayer, plus the readings, too, of course: lots of bits to blend together into a tasty and nourishing sermon ...

first, a brief recap from the first of this series: just as we begin our Communion with the Confession, so too we should start our prayers by 'mourning our losses'; we need to be real about where we are, and where the world is, and how we feel about it

we begin with a cry for help, because we know our need of God; only then can we start the move from despair to hope, from self-pity to faith

like the disciples on the Emmaus Road in Nouwen's book, we need to tell the story as we see it, but then we need to listen; so these disciples now hear the stranger (who turns out to be Jesus) tell the story his way; he explains how the crucifixion was not the disaster they thought it, but the path the Messiah had to follow

this is not a new story for them; they've heard it before, but not really understood it, nor their place within it; they have been, this stranger tells them, 'foolish and slow to believe'

now we are in much the same position; we may know the story, more or less; we may come to church, say the Creed, and read the Bible, but we can be 'foolish and slow to believe' all that we hear

Nouwen writes:

'this slowness is not an innocent slowness, because it can entrap us in our complaints and narrow-mindedness; it is the slowness that can prevent us from discovering the [true] landscape in which we live; someone has to open our eyes and help us discover what lies beyond our own perception; someone has to make our hearts burn!'

we too will remain trapped within our own cycles of self-pity, cynicism and hopelessness – about ourselves and about the world – and our worship and prayer will remain stuck there, unless we can hear and believe the Word that God speaks to us; how does that happen?

in the Communion service, the Confession – our 'cry for help' – is followed by a sequence of steps that take us out of ourselves and help us find that wider perspective: the Absolution assures us of God's forgiveness and grace; the Gloria affirms God's power and goodness; the Prayer for the Day points us towards God and his purposes for us and the church

if that's the 'starter, then comes the 'main course', the 'meat': the readings, sermon and creed, which set out the big story and help us to understand our place in it; and out of this understanding will flow our prayers of intercession, with renewed hope and faith

the same pattern applies in our own daily prayers: here again, Bible reading is an essential ingredient, to give us perspective on ourselves and the world we live in; otherwise, we will just keep going round in our own little circles of complaint or worry; when we do grasp the bigger picture that we are part of, that gives new direction to our prayers

there are so many words bombarding us constantly, written or spoken, TV, radio, newspapers, internet, for us to process and respond to; we are used to letting them slip by us, we pick up the essential information, but we don't allow them to touch us deeply; sadly, we can treat the familiar words of the Bible or our Communion service in the same way; so we need to give enough time and attention, to receive them at a deeper level, to allow God to be present to us in them

readings and sermons are not simply for our information and instruction, to tell us what to think or what to do; as we hear them our hearts should 'burn within us', like those disciples on the way to Emmaus; we should sense the presence of God himself in them; that's a thought we will return to in the next sermon

Sam's prayer-leaves, for our prayer tree, invite us to be honest about where we are in prayer, which is an essential step for our growth in prayer; but there is also the invitation to explore new ways of praying, that will allow God to touch us, even to surprise us

there are a number of ways to do this: there are Patterns for Daily Prayer [copies in church] – simple forms of prayer that combine set prayers and readings with opportunities for silence and impromptu prayer; there are also prayer websites that can provide a helpful pattern to follow [e.g. www.sacredspace.ie]

all these can help, to take us out of our space into God's space, so that we can *pray with more understanding, hope and faith*

now for our final ingredient in this potent sermon-mixture, the readings: in 1 Samuel 17, the situation seems hopeless – this giant, Goliath, is making mock of Saul's armies, and no one has the courage to stand up to him; no one, that is, till David appears: 'let no one's heart fail because of him; I will go and fight with him, for the Lord will save me from his hand'

David's experience of protecting his flock from lions and bears has prepared him for this greater challenge; he has learned to trust God and to step out in faith, against all the odds

is that our experience of prayer and worship, and its relation to our everyday lives? do they prepare us to face greater challenges with hope and faith?

in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul recounts his many hardships – beatings, imprisonment, hunger and the like – but not as grounds for self-pity or self-promotion; he receives these trials with patience, kindness, love, and joy; he holds onto hope and faith in God through it all

again, are we ready to receive the trials of our lives in the same way? can we bring them into our prayer and worship, and hear God's word to us, moving us to hope and faith?

in Mark 4, there are more problems, and more complaints: the little boats tossing on the choppy waters, the disciples crying out to the sleeping Jesus, 'Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?'

we ask the same, ‘God, don’t you care about what I am going through? or about the state the world is in? are you sleeping on the job? why don’t you do something to help?’

and Jesus says to us, as he said to the disciples then, ‘why are you afraid? have you still no faith?’

we have a choice – panic or hope, self-pity or faith; it is as we hear and absorb God’s word day by day, that the choice of faith and hope becomes more instinctive and immediate to us, and we are able to pray too with faith and hope

this is the Word that not only instructs and informs but also makes Christ present to us; and this is where we head for in the next part of our Eucharist, as we receive Christ himself in the Sacrament of bread and wine

to end, some words of Henri Nouwen:

‘without the Word that keeps lifting us up as God’s chosen people, we remain, or become, small people, stuck in the complaints that emerge from our daily struggle to survive; without the word that makes our hearts burn, our life has little meaning, little vitality, little energy; the Word makes us part of the great story of our salvation; our little stories are lifted up into God’s great story and given their unique place; we see that our daily, ordinary lives are in fact sacred lives that play a necessary role in the fulfilment of God’s promises’