

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 26th July 2015

Prayer IV – ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord’

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

now for that final ‘masterchef’ moment, after all the ingredients have been sliced, diced, boiled and fried, they are at last ‘plated up’, arranged artistically for the delectation of the judges; oh, how they hate slop and muddle, with meat, veg and sauce mixed up together!

I’m hoping to avoid that sort of mess and achieve a measure of clarity and harmony as I ‘plate things up’ in this last of our four sermons on prayer! so here goes ...

the series is based on a book ‘With Burning Hearts’, by Henri Nouwen, which itself holds together two stories: the story of our Communion service, and the story of the Emmaus Road from Luke 24; and the idea is to make these stories a pattern for our prayers

do you have a sense of ‘story’, of ‘flow’, in our weekly act of worship, or is it rather a sequence of disconnected items, that have little to do with each other? there’s a prayer, then a hymn, a reading, then another hymn ... oh, and coffee and cake at the end!

what Nouwen’s book brings out, is the idea of a *movement* through the liturgy, highlighted in four stages: Confession, where we mourn our losses and acknowledge our need of God; Readings and Sermon, where we hear God’s word for our situation; Communion itself, where we receive God’s presence in bread and wine; and then what? what is the last thing we say? ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord ...’; we are heading, in our worship and in our prayer, towards that moment of sending out; hold that thought and now turn to the other story:

on the road to Emmaus, two disciples walk with hanging heads, mourning the loss of their friend, Jesus, crucified two days before; then they hear the words of a stranger, who gives new meaning to those events; they invite him to eat with them, and in the breaking of bread he is revealed to them as the risen Christ

what next? ‘well, that was nice, what a lovely chat we had, and wasn’t it great to see Jesus again; now for a good night’s sleep’? no – they go! despite the late hour and the dangers of the road, they set off at once back to Jerusalem; they’ve got to tell someone of their amazing encounter with Jesus! Nouwen writes:

‘what a difference between their “going home” and their return; it is the difference between doubt and faith, despair and hope, fear and love; it is the difference between two dispirited human beings dragging themselves along the road and two friends walking fast, running even at times, all excited about the news they have for their friends’

is that how our Sunday worship leaves us? is that how our prayer leaves us? we’ve brought our troubles before God; we’ve heard the word that lifts us out of our space

into God's space; we've invited him to be present with us – for what? do we feel equipped, confident, excited, and ready to 'go and tell', are we ready for *mission*?

if not, we are missing the point! yes, prayer and worship are meant to give us comfort, to help us make sense of our lives, and get through the challenges we face; but it can't stop with us, it must be shared! how do we do that?

three things to pick out from the Emmaus Road story, about telling our story and engaging in mission: first, we do all have a story to tell, about our own experience of God, of faith, of prayer and so on; it may not seem like the most exciting of stories, but it is ours, it is genuine, and we are the best people to tell it! let's not be shy!

second, when we tell our story, and engage in mission, we're not doing it alone but in community; it was crucial that there were *two* disciples on the Emmaus Road, not just one, for they could encourage one another, and tell their story together; so it is for us – we have a shared story, a story we can tell *together*

third, God is with us, and we have God's resources for mission; those disciples were filled with the Spirit of Jesus, they had listened to his words and received his presence; and though he'd vanished from their sight at that moment of recognition, he went with them in a new way as they set out in mission together

so, we have a story to tell, we can tell it together, and we have God's resources for mission; and our mission is intimately related to our prayer and worship:

without a basis in prayer and worship, our mission will be empty, lacking in authenticity, power and love; but conversely, unless it results in mission, our prayer and worship will be self-absorbed and fruitless; it was so encouraging to hear someone last Sunday, describe this is an 'outward-looking church'! amen! let that be so!
prayer is *for* mission

now a look at today's readings: in Ephesians 3 Paul prays a beautiful prayer for that inward apprehension of the reality and presence of God that we seek in prayer and worship: that Christ might dwell in our hearts, that we might be rooted and grounded, and filled up to overflowing with the breadth, length, height and depth of God's love – wow! *four dimensional love*: with breadth, length, height and depth!

have you been to a 3D cinema, with the special specs, that make everything leap out of the screen at you? it should be like that and more with the love that we encounter in worship and prayer – beyond technicolour, beyond HD or 3D, it's God's *4D love* – completely surrounding and enveloping us!

with that kind of love in us, then we are ready to go: Paul continues, 'by the power at work in us he is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine'; with God's resources we can achieve beyond our wildest dreams – and that all flows from prayer and worship

in John 6, Jesus challenges the disciples, 'feed all these people'; it can't be done, says Philip, we don't have the resources! Andrew is more constructive, but not ex-

actly hopeful: five loaves and two fish – how far will they go amongst so many? but Jesus takes that little, and uses it to feed five thousand people – with left-overs!

and God can do the same with our ‘limited’ resources; when we work together in his name and by his power, he can use us to bless many; at the Foodbank collection yesterday, 20 of us stood outside Langley shops and lots of food was donated; we just gave our time, and God moved the hearts of the people to be generous! it wasn’t quite feeding the 5000, but definitely a step in the right direction! *we have God’s resources for the mission he gives us*

the final part of the gospel, where Jesus walks on the water, puts me in mind of Josh, Nina and children, who are with us for (nearly) the last time before returning to Ukraine; I imagine, like those disciples rowing across the lake in the dark and the wind and waves, they have felt pretty exposed and vulnerable at times, and wondering, are we in the right place, will we be able to cope?

but Nina and Josh have met the risen Christ, as it were, walking on the water by their little boat, and heard his words, ‘It is I; do not be afraid’; and that has strengthened them to continue on the mission he has called them to; and the same can be true for us – we do not need to be afraid in mission, because Jesus is with us too time to do the final ‘plating up’, arranging artistically the four ingredients of our prayer and worship: we mourn our losses and acknowledge our need of God; we hear his word, that lifts us out of despair into a new vision of the Kingdom; we recognise his presence with us, by the Holy Spirit and in the bread and wine of Communion; and then finally we too are sent in his name, to bring hope and help wherever he leads

I offer you that ‘on a plate’ as a pattern and resource for your own prayers

some final words from Henri Nouwen: ‘the Eucharist (and our prayer) is always mission; [what] has freed us from our paralyzing sense of loss and revealed to us that the Spirit of Jesus lives within us, [also] empowers us to go out into the world and bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberty to captives, and to proclaim that God has again shown his favour to all people’

may we be ‘rooted and grounded in his love’, through our worship and prayer, and may that love move us into mission, with a new desire and hope to serve God and his world