

Spiritual Disciplines Mini-Series 8am – Private Prayer

We're now into week 2 of our mini series about the habits that go to make up a healthy spiritual life, the kinds of things that help us grow as Christians. Remember, as I said last week, and Helen the week before that, spiritual growth is not something you get just by wishing for it. It's a bit like physical health – you've actually got to eat those vegetables, walk those steps, get that sleep. As with the body, so with the soul: there are things you can do to grow, and if you don't do them, then you probably won't. Over September we're looking at some of them, before coming together at our Parish Quiet Day on the 28th to see how to put them into practice in our own lives in what is often called a personal Rule of Life.

Number one on the list of healthy habits, last week, was worship and especially *public* worship – that is, quite simply, the business of week in, week out, coming to church. There were two main reasons I said coming to church was a central part of the Christian life. Number one: communion, the eucharist. It's here that God has promised to feed you, to strengthen you. You can't complain about being spiritually weak if you don't turn up. Number two: other people - in all their difference and oddness and sometimes downright irritating-ness. God has organised things so that we don't get to relate to him privately, as if we were the centre of the universe. He comes to us with, in and through everyone else. There's no proper Christian life without the Church. That was last week.

This week, number two: private prayer. Coming second, by the way, doesn't mean it is less important. It's really not. Comparing the importance of private prayer and public worship is a bit like asking whether your lungs are more important than your heart, or whether water is more important than air. Take away either one of *them* in your physical life, and you won't last long. Ditto in Christianity: lose church, you're in big trouble; lose private prayer, you are equally so.

So why is private prayer so important? The answer is really simple. God loves you. The reason He made you is so that He could share his life with you, pour all the brilliance and beauty and mystery that we mean by the word 'God', pour it into you. Make of you something glorious. That is why you exist. Now, if you did nothing about that, if you just ignored it and paid no attention to God whatsoever, maybe it would still happen. It's what God wants, and God is God, so His wanting is pretty powerful. However, it would be better, would it not, to hold yourself open? To at least turn towards Him, and open your arms, and try to welcome Him? And that's what prayer is.

Notice, by the way, that means prayer is *not* primarily about asking for things: for good luck, new jobs, healing from sickness, peace on earth. Not primarily. Those things are part of it, and you certainly don't forget your needs or the needs of the world as you turn towards God, but the primary thing is simply to turn towards the reality of God, to let His reality overwhelm you, soak you, fill you.

That's why we do it. How do we do it?

Well, how many different kinds of people are there? The entire point is that this is personal, this is intimate, and it is very difficult to lay down precise rules about how other people should do it. Prayer will work differently for each of one of us, and it will probably change for each one of us throughout our lives, as we change.

However, it is possible to lay down a couple of basic principles.

Number one, it must be regular. I'd say daily is the best, without question – ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour a day, stopping and just trying to be open before God. I realise for many that seems just impossible, and perhaps for some it actually is. But if not daily, then most days. If it isn't regular, if it is just occasional, just when you feel like it, then you're making it pretty obvious that really you think your life is about something else, that God is not that important. But once again, this is what you were made for, this is your destiny. It's worth your time.

Number two, whatever you do in that time must be something that actually creates that sense of being open, of holding yourself before God and waiting to receive Him. It will almost certainly involve being quiet, and being still – not just in your body, but in your mind and your heart. It will probably not, that means, involve lots of reading, or talking, or moving – I'm all for those things, and they have their place in the spiritual life, but that place isn't here. Here, right at the centre, there needs to be whatever shuts us up, and clears all our usual chatter and thoughts and distractions out of the way, so that it's just you and God, face to face.

Anybody who has tried doing that for any serious amount of time will tell you, this is blooming difficult. Being still, physically, mentally, emotionally ... that is hard. So here's two pieces of good counsel.

Number 1: remember that there's more to you than the surface of your mind, just like there's more to a plant than the bit you see above the ground. Try to trust that even when the surface of your mind is all over the place, and you can't get it to be still, trust that even so God is working away at your roots, where you can't see. Remember, He loves you. He wants to give Himself. He's not waiting for your prayer to be perfect before he starts. If you are trying to be still, trying to want Him, that's good for enough for Him, and He will be at work.

Number 2: the best way to be still, perhaps, is to give your mind something to do. Give it, perhaps, the Lord's Prayer – to say it quietly, deeply, slowly, turning over the phrases, thinking what they might mean for you, now. Give it what is called the Jesus Prayer, the simple mantra 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner', repeated slowly, over and over and over again, breathing in, breathing out. So many Christians

across the centuries, myself included, have found that these words make a kind of a channel, deep within the mind and heart, a channel that God comes through.

Finally, I've spoken too much perhaps, as if this is all really straightforward. That if you're regular in private prayer, everything will become simply and obviously clear and real, that you'll suddenly know what phrases like the beauty and brilliance and mystery of God really mean, that we can all be spiritual masters just like that. Not so, I'm afraid. Most of stay beginners at this all our lives, most of us only scratch the surface of the wonders of prayer. It is quite easy to lose heart, quite easy to think you must be doing it wrong, quite easy to think everyone else is doing it better.

When you are tempted to feel that way, can I invite you to remember these wonderful words from Archbishop Michael Ramsey – a man who everybody else thought was a spiritual giant, who would be the first to tell you he was a beginner himself. This is what Ramsey said about finding prayer difficult:

'Try to think of it more simply. It means putting yourself near God, with God, in a time of quietness every day. You put yourself with him just as you are, in the feebleness of your concentration, in your lack of warmth and desire, not trying to manufacture pious thoughts or phrases. You put yourself with God, empty perhaps, but hungry and thirsty for him; and if in sincerity you cannot say that you want God, you can perhaps tell him that you want to want him; and if you cannot even say that, perhaps you can say that you want to want to want him! Thus you can be very near him in your naked sincerity, and *he* will do the rest, drawing out from you longings deeper than you knew were there... Forgive me for putting this so clumsily. I am trying to say that you find you are 'with God' not by achieving certain devotional exercises in his presence but by daring to be your own self as you reach towards him.'

I would say not clumsily put at all, but the very heart of what we need to know about private prayer. Treasure those words, and keep praying.

To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.