

Last week, if you recall, our Old Testament Lesson was the story of Elijah hiding in the cave on the slopes of Mount Horeb, on the run from Jezebel, in fear for his life, feeling very vulnerable, desperately alone, at a very low ebb both mentally and spiritually. In the course of my reflections I spoke of a book I was reading by Richard Holloway, former Primus of the Church of Scotland, in which he spoke of a time in his ministry when God went absent. In this period in his life prayer, worship, ministry seemed empty.

This morning, at the 11:00 o'clock service, we are using the form of worship for the Service of Wholeness and Healing. This brings together both sickness and prayer. Illness, particularly a serious illness either in ourselves or one close to us, can be a time when God seems to go absent. I recall a time in my own life, as I approached my ordination and my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I recall anger, despair, God not seeming to be around when I wanted him the most. It was, as it turned out, at that particular time that Canon John Bartlett was giving a series of lectures on the Psalms and I found in them, quite literally, a spiritual lifeline.

In the Psalms I discovered a total openness, a total honesty with God. When the Psalmist expresses joy he does so with great expression, with timbrels, in dances, with trumpets and tambourines, in extravagant and exuberant tones. When he is in despair his expressions of gloom and hopelessness are stark. When he feels God has let him down, as the evil seem to triumph over the righteous, he demands to know why. His hopes for vengeance can be expressed in quite blood curdling tones as he expresses hopes of dashing his enemy's children against the rocks. In the psalms I discovered I could be

totally open with God. I could praise, I could question, I could complain, I could celebrate, I could express pain and despair – and know that I am heard.

In a word, there is communication. And so in the opening verses of the Psalm appointed for today the Psalmist proclaims:

- 1 I cry aloud to | God; @  
I cry aloud to | God and | he will | hear me.
- 2 In the day of my trouble I have | sought the | Lord; @  
by night my hand is stretched out and does not tire;  
my | soul re|fuses | comfort. (Ps 72:1-2)

Which brings me into the subject of prayer. What are we doing when we pray? Are we trying to change God or change ourselves? We pray for peace in the world, we pray for the sick, we pray for those on the margins of our society, we pray for those who mourn. I recall when I was in Northern Ireland, as the peace process began, resolving in my own mind to pray on a regular basis for the various political leaders by name – and for some considerable time the names Adams, McGuinness, Paisley, Irvine stuck in my throat. Did they change; did I change – but there is no doubt that Northern Ireland, for all its continuing tensions, is a very different place – people changed and entered into dialogues previously thought unthinkable.

What are we doing when we pray for the sick? I recall discussing this with a colleague in Ballymena who was involved in the ministry of healing. He described it as ‘messy’ with lots of loose ends and unanswered questions – yet he felt compelled to continue praying for the sick – it was the right thing for him to do and situations changed in ways he could not expect or understand.

I would often find that hymns, with their poetry and economy of language can express things almost too deep for words. As I thought over things my mind turned to a hymn in our book I have rarely heard sung but one I would reflect on. It is hymn 625 in our book, written by the Moravian hymn writer James Montergomery:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,  
Uttered or unexpressed, .....

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,  
.....  
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech  
That infant lips can try;

.....  
Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,  
The Christian's native air,  
.....

O Christ by whom we come to God,  
The Life, the Truth, the Way!  
The humble path of prayer you trod:  
Lord, teach us how to pray!

I spoke of prayer as communication. I would now go one stage further and think of prayer as encounter, of engaging with God. Now again, is this just a matter of drawing God's attention to things he may or may not have noticed? We pray, we ask. If you look at the way that word ask is used in the New Testament, we have ask in terms of demand, of interrogation – but the most common use is in terms of enquire, translating the Greek word *αἰτέω*; we have prayer as a seeking to understand. In St John's Gospel, in the account of the teaching of Jesus at the Last Supper, we have a number of instances of Jesus speaking of what it means to ask of God in prayer.

<sup>14</sup> If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. *John 14:14*

<sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you *John 15:7*

<sup>16</sup> You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. *John 15:16*

Asking in the name of Christ, abiding in Christ, chosen by Christ, we are drawn into a deeper relationship, a deeper understanding of God as personal; a God who hears, understands, who meets me at my point of deepest need.

Prayer as communication, as encounter, is not something we witness but rather something we participate in from deep within ourselves. To go back to our hymn:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,  
Uttered or unexpressed, .....

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,  
When none but God is near.

.....

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