PRAYER

For more than three hours last Wednesday (19th September), in Ripon Cathedral, +Rowan Williams, past Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke and answered questions with more than 300 clergy from across the Diocese of Leeds. It was the day that wind and very heavy rain battered North and West Yorkshire, which somehow added to the drama of what we heard. How to pray?

I wanted to share the outline and a few specifics of what he shared, as I think it may be the key to personal growth and depth in spirituality in our church, if we ‘have ears to hear.’

ROOTS (THEOLOGY) OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER. Christianity begins in a fresh experience of prayer. There is a recognition that something new had happened while Jesus was physically here on earth, and in the years that followed. Ancient Israel had been taught to encounter God within the Old Covenant – through attendance at the temple, the recitation of psalms and the highly developed sacrificial system (the physical and spiritual offerings made by priests and people). The veil within the temple spoke powerfully of a place where heaven and earth overlapped – the images on the temple veil encompassed the whole of creation. This was a place where the world became itself again – a place of wholeness.

We were reminded of the Anglican priest and poet, George Herbert’s sonnet simply called ‘Prayer’[[1]](#footnote-1) -full of metaphors ‘about prayer,’ picturing the extremes of outer space, the smell of fresh spices, the sound of church bells, yet these were not on earth, the beauty of the bird of Paradise …. So, he asserted, prayer encompasses the whole of creation.

Under the New Covenant Jesus prayed in the presence of his disciples. And when they pleaded with him ‘teach us how to pray’ he led them in the Lord’s Prayer – they were learning to pray afresh. Things are brought back together when we pray, we pray for the kingdom to come, we pray that God’s will is done on earth, as in heaven, we ask for daily provision (our daily bread), we focus on reconciliation with God and one another (forgiveness) – we are swept up in what +Rowan described as the *new* creation. It is anticipating the consummation of creation at the point where Jesus returns and all is brought back together as it should be.

From reading the Gospels, we can see that prayer inhabits the future, yet ‘here and now’ as he said. It speaks of restoration, reconciliation and homecoming – a prodigal earth, if you like, coming home to Father, after generations of neglect and absence. But this is vastly rich and complicated, as we see when we look in detail at Paul’s letter to the Romans (Chapter 8).

Rowan kept referring back to Romans 8, and I am sure it is worth giving that a closer look, in order to enter in to a richer experience of personal and corporate prayer as a church. What do we see?

* This is NOT dutiful prayer, it is NOT ‘last chance’ prayer when things are out of control, but what a Book of Common Prayer Collect describes as ‘a hearty desire to pray.’
* There is a basic, underpinning, perspective – a desire to live in a reconciled world.
* Thomas Aquinas also spoke of prayer as interpretation of our desires, “*prayer* interprets our *desires*, as it were, before God” in a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer
* Prayer is always going on – it is facing in the same direction that Jesus faces, present with the Trinity, it is where we know deeply that we really belong – we always begin with ‘Our Father’

It is important to see that this is God’s idea, what He wants. Not ‘a struggle to get there from here’ which is what it seems like to many of us at times. +Rowan spoke of us ‘slipping into a stream of life and action already there,’ the Father pours out His love for us to mirror back. It is happening all the time. It is, in this light, understandable that it is the church – the body of Christ – that prays – far greater than the resources of any individual; so called ‘private prayer’ is caught up in this bigger perspective of prayer. It covers everything, the prayer of Christ’s body, including the heavenly prayer(s) of the communion of saints – those who have gone before us. It really is being swept up in the whole of creation, past, present and future.

IMPLICATIONS & APPLICATION

+Rowan asked us two questions, following this introduction:-

1. *What would people see and hear if they dropped in to our church?* What do we want people to pick up? Would they grasp the motivation of our prayer life? Would they see something creative going on as we engage with the Creator in prayer? How would this affect our worship, our stories, our welcome?
2. If the words we speak/hear have one claim to truthfulness, it should be that ‘God is real’ – there are moments where we ‘allow God to be God.’ *Are we serious enough in the gravity with which we speak of God?*

He then addressed three perspectives on prayer, in practice:-

* What are the right triggers for prayer? It is allowing time for looking, listening and breathing, attending to God, giving space ‘for God to be God’. There is a ‘transforming seriousness’ about prayer. It is best when it is as ‘intense and unbroken as possible’. Allow slack in gatherings, as church, and as individuals. Slow the rhythm, being present and prayerful within our worship. How we move and speak and breath.
* We want ‘people to be in the habit of looking.’ What do we want people to see? Prayer should be varied, but always a space to digest and settle. Full of gratitude. When +Rowan sings ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’ on Good Friday, he thinks that he can survey (or look) in a fresh way at what Jesus has done through his sacrifice. So, the roots of Christian prayer are fundamentally gratitude and thanks.
* Prayer is not a kind of functional ladder to God, rather being filled with a profound sense of wonder at our encounter with God. In his view prayer always begins with wonderment and gaze, looking into the mystery of who God is, a place where our breathing slows, a place to look and hope for a New Covenant, a place where God has brought us, rather than words spoken by us to catch His attention, perhaps? Although our gaze is turned towards God, we should always remember that His gaze is turned on us.
* Prayer – being a place where God can see us – means us living in the light. A place where our knowledge of ourselves increases. Also a place of repentance and confession, as we accept the depth of our fallenness and sin. Peter begged Jesus to depart from him, as a ‘sinful man’ not because Jesus lectured him on his faults, but when Jesus miraculously brought a huge haul of fish into the boat (Luke 5.8). Our encounters with God, in reality, begin by us being overwhelmed by His generosity. So, we are encouraged to see prayer, also, as a steady habit of exposure to the light; not self-castigating, but just a clarity who I am and what I’ve been. We should expect prayer to tell us something about ourselves. The logic of prayer is that repentance follows self-discovery in prayer and our honesty before God. A God ‘from whom no secrets are hid’ (Collect for Purity, Book of Common Prayer)
* Intercession – the perspective on prayer so far also prepares us for prayer for others. Intercession = prayer FOR. It is seen by God in His generosity, we expose our own fears, stay there with them believing that God does not look away when he sees who and what we are. God never withdraws His support, but kindles in us a hope for the world. A world from which God does not turn away. Our prayer for the other must be fed by that basic conviction – to align our seeing and wanting with the seeing and wanting of God, Himself. Paul (Philippians 2.5-8) speaks of us ‘having the mind of Christ.’ Jesus frequently asked people ‘what do YOU want?’ He invites us to be bold and courageous[[2]](#footnote-2), to speak out our requests. He also showed how the honesty of the Psalmist encourages us to say what we really want to say (even if it sounds initially like our thoughts appear to be vengeful and unforgiving). God wants to hear our thoughts. +Rowan urged us to frame our intercessions in the form: “What I long for is this outcome …..” and make this as specific as possible.
  + How can we best help others form intercessions?
    - Not ‘the vaguer the better’; Not ‘the shopping list’; Not ‘Lord, as you know perfectly well ….’
  + Make it specific - +Rowan prays daily for and end to the violence in South Sudan, and also an end to the two monstrous war lords who have caused so much suffering – he prays that they will repent.
  + God’s will be done. How do we relate to what we are praying for? Our honest wishes for the world we live in, and for a future pregnant with restoration and reconciliation.
* Prayer is fundamentally about ‘growth.’ The place where we learn to see afresh, see things we did not see before. We invoked the Holy Spirit to open our eyes still more. Of course, sin has the habit of ‘not seeing.’
* People are waiting for something to come to the surface. Did you ever think that it took thousands of years to notice the ‘evils’ of slavery, and similarly the equality of women and men. Prayer makes us ‘less able to ignore things.’ Where are the hurts? How do we bring the world together with reconciliation? Praying and acting in ways that are consistent with this – what we are growing into is no less than the ‘life of Christ.’ God’s presence – the gift of God’s active presence – the repetition ‘in time of the eternal reality of God.’

1. Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,

   God's breath in man returning to his birth,

   The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,

   The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth

   Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,

   Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,

   The six-days world transposing in an hour,

   A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;

   Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,

   Exalted manna, gladness of the best,

   Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,

   The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

   Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,

   The land of spices; something understood. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Greek word *parrhesia* or *parrÄ“sia* which some suggest was coined in Athens*,* has been rendered as*:* frank speaking, candour or candid trusting speech, forthrightness, boldness/courage in speaking,  public speech, fearlessness and a joyful sense of freedom and confidence. Any citizen of full standing had the freedom to express his opinions freely, whether before other assembled people, or in the marketplace. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)