

Venta Group of Parishes, Stoke Holy Cross

Benefice Holy Communion

Address on prayer by The Rt Revd Graham James, Bishop of Norwich

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“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see”. (John 1. 45, 46)

Philip invites Nathanael to come and see Jesus. That’s the best answer to Nathaniel’s cynical question. We want others to come and see Jesus, as we have seen him. But sometimes we need to be reminded ourselves to come and see Jesus afresh. The invitation to pray for Christians is an invitation to meet God in Jesus Christ.

My daughter teaches in a Church school in Walworth in South London. I am the unpaid theological consultant to the staff. Last week I had a text from her. *“Do you know anything about St Philip? He is the class saint of one of my colleagues and she has to do an assembly on him.”* My daughter did religious studies A-level but it is because she is a bishop’s daughter that all the staff come to her for advice. I was able to tell her about Philip’s appearance at the beginning of John’s gospel. I told her what he said at the feeding of the five thousand when he remarked that even if they had a lot of money they couldn’t find bread for so many. Later, some Greeks approached Philip and say *“We want to see Jesus”* and he leads them to him. There is not that much about this disciple called Philip in the New Testament. *“Yes, I know all that”* said Rebecca. *“Isn’t there anything else?”* Well there are a lot of legends but I told her that when Philip appears he is often

leading people to see Jesus. What's better than that? So there was an assembly in South London last week where I believe the children in St Philip's class were led to see Jesus. I shall start charging the Diocese of Southwark for my theological advice!

The first principle to grasp about Christian prayer is that we must want to see Jesus. We long for an encounter with the living God. Often we don't quite know how to go about it. I fear that includes people in our churches too who are sometimes afraid to say how difficult they find prayer.

It will be twenty years in September since Diana, Princess of Wales, died in that tragic car crash. I was a bishop in Cornwall at the time and remember that week vividly because in Truro, as elsewhere in the country, queues of people came to church, many of them young, to light candles in the cathedral and pray, to sign books of condolence, to lay flowers. In Truro we had to import feeding troughs filled with sand in order to hold all the candles that people wanted to light. It is extraordinary how this has become so commonplace in the Church of England. Of course a candle is a sign of light in the darkness and speaks to a deep instinct in us all but one particularly relevant to Christ the Light of the World. "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness", as someone once said.

I remember a vergers in Truro Cathedral telling me of a young man who approached him after signing the book of condolence saying "*Is there anywhere I can pray here?*" The vergers was a bit taken aback and said "*Well, it's a cathedral; you can pray anywhere you want.*" So the young man went off and then a couple of minutes later he came back to the vergers and said "*Can you tell me how to pray?*" Fortunately one of the cathedral clergy was on hand and the young man was soon having some simple instruction. But the vergers said after this that they had been told how to

answer people's questions about the cathedral and where to find the loos, but no-one had trained them how to answer that one.

Of course, this suggests that prayer is something for the cognoscenti whereas the most unlettered and uneducated person can pray. Often such people are more uninhibited in their prayers and more expectant than those of us in the so called sophisticated Western world. It is because they have the desire. Again, to quote Michael Ramsey, who said "*When someone says I want to want to pray, they have begun to pray*". For the life of prayer is the heart's desire for God. Without desire there is no prayer.

But there needs to be discipline in our prayer life as well. I am grateful beyond measure for the discipline of saying the Daily Office – Morning and Evening Prayer, with others if possible. For morning and evening prayer in the Anglican tradition is nothing other than the daily opportunity to immerse ourselves in scripture. Nearly all the Offices, as we call them, are simply an arrangement of the scriptures. We pray with scripture, with the inspired word of God. I am glad that an increasing number of our churches in our diocese do this publicly and on a daily basis.

In the Church of England the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer were not meant to be just for the clergy. Thomas Cranmer, to whom we owe the Book of Common Prayer, expected morning and evening prayer to be recited in every parish church every day with the community gathering for this twice daily feast of scriptural praise. The monasteries may have been dissolved but his vision was for every parish church to be a community of prayer – of lay people as they went about their ordinary lives giving time to God. Of course the world was different. An agrarian economy where people did not travel to work was very different to our own. But I expect across most benefices many people are trying to pray on their own when they could be praying together.

At the heart of Morning and Evening Prayer is the recitation of the psalms. Indeed, all 150 of them are recited every month in the offices of the Book of Common Prayer. I have been reciting the Psalms for so long they have seeped into my blood stream. It was St Benedict who understood the psalms as a summary of the Bible, full of allusions to biblical persons and events but recalling them in a way which transformed them into prayer. The psalms were traditionally believed to have been composed by King David, though we now know they had many authors. From the beginning of the Church, when Christians prayed them they found in them the voice of the Son of David, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Son of God and Son of Man, he has taken to himself the voice of all humanity in all its diversity as an offering to God the Father.

So when we say or pray the psalms, we hear the voice of Jesus, but we also recognise that he prayed these prayers during his earthly life. He would have learned them from his mother Mary, for it was the mother's task in Israel to teach her young children the psalms. What I have learned from praying the psalms every day is that I cannot hide anything from God. Of course, I can't anyway, but I know how I want to present myself at my best before God even though he knows me and all my faults better than I know them myself. Think of Psalm 130.

“Out of the depths have I cried unto you, O Lord...

If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you...

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;

In his word is my hope...”

Or think of Psalm 12 which I recited the other day and which appeared to be written almost for our own time.

*“Help me, Lord, for no-one godly is left;
The faithful have vanished from the whole human race.
They all speak falsely with their neighbour;
They flatter with their lips, but speak from a double heart...
You, O Lord, will watch over us
And guard us from this generation for ever.
The wicked strut on every side,
When what is vile is exalted by the whole human race.”*

There is a voice of despair about the world brought to God in prayer – unvarnished, extreme, intemperate. Are you like that when you pray? If not, why not? This honesty is at the heart of the biblical understanding of prayer.

How honest am I able to be with God (and myself in prayer?). Am I able to share anger as well as joy, disappointment as well as praise? Then we come to Psalm 22 which begins:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Yes, of course, Jesus was himself quoting the scriptures as he hung upon the cross in desolation.

*“All who see me laugh me to scorn;
They curl their lips and wag their heads saying,
“He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him;
Let him deliver him, if he delights in him.”*

And as we pray those words we hear those gathered around the cross taunting Jesus with the same words as he dies for us.

There are two particular problems with prayer in the contemporary Church. The first is the neglect of the psalms which are used less and less in our worship, much to our spiritual impoverishment. The second is to think of prayer only as intercession, prayers of asking. Intercessions have become increasingly significant in our public worship so we look upon the intercession as “the prayers” rather than seeing the whole act of worship as prayer – the hymns, songs, readings and Eucharistic prayer as part of our whole offering of prayer to God.

When the House of Bishops of the Church of England meets, as it does residentially two or three times each year, the agenda is always huge. Sometimes it felt as if our prayer together was merely a sort of hors d'oeuvres or dessert. In recent years, though, as well as saying the Offices and celebrating the Eucharist we have given increasing time to our study of the scriptures. Or, rather, we have practised what's known as *lectio divina*. Those Latin words simply mean “divine reading”.

We began to realise that in the midst of our busy lives even Bible study had become acquisitive and purpose driven. I look back on some of the Bible studies I led when I was a parish priest more than thirty years ago. I prepared well to lead them but it was as if I was desperate to teach rather than allowing God himself to speak through scripture. I was too keen to interpret rather than reflect. We need to stop and listen.

So what do we do nowadays at the House of Bishops? It may be something with which you are familiar already. It requires no expertise other than a love of God's word. It simply requires a few people to come together to do it.

We take a short passage of scripture – it is often one of those set in the Lectionary for the day – and if we are in a group of say six or seven one member of the group will read it or sometimes we will read one verse at a time around the room. We then spend five to ten minutes simply reflecting in silence on that scripture without any other interruption or interpretation. Then the scripture is read again. And each person simply indicates a word or phrase within that reading which has touched their hearts. Then another brief silence to reflect on those words. The passage is read again and then we share a thought about why that word has meant something to us and how it connects with our lives. Another silence is followed by reading the passage again after which we think about what Christ is saying to us through this scripture or what he is calling us to do through his word. And then we pray, but, of course, the whole activity is prayer: opening ourselves to God through the gift of his word.

It is simple. There is more attentive silence than talk. It is surprising just how much comes from this. Calls to action. Encouragement in mission. Engagement with the world. But from the scriptures. That is Christian prayer.