

## **Prayer: Withdrawing and Advancing.**

Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2010

In the Crown we have lots of people who were not born in the UK – especially from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and South America.

If you grew up in one of these cultures, you probably have different ideas about things like what it means to be part of a community.

And if you moved to the UK after living in an extended family and community, you probably found Britain to be an unfriendly, unwelcoming place.

If you were born in the UK and have travelled to another culture – Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America, then you may have found it a bit claustrophobic, not getting any time to yourself or personal space; I remember going for the first time to a different culture, where people were with me all the time, and finding it overwhelming in how kind people were to me, but also, after a while, quite hard not having any space or time when I felt I could relax.

The reason for this is that different cultures have different ways of doing things.

In the East and Africa and South America, family and community are very important; who you are is shaped by the people around you and belonging to a community and fitting in with your community is vital.

In the West, people think much more about individuals, or close family; there is a saying “An Englishman’s home is his castle” and I think this is how people in the West think – I have my personal space; I’m having “Me-time”; I can close the door and be myself and go out to meet other people when I want, when it fits in with other things.

We all need to realise that none of us is completely right or completely wrong (although people from the Bible would recognise Middle Eastern or African culture more than Western culture.)

So why is this important when we’re thinking about prayer?

Because we all look at things through glasses of our culture, we can read the Bible differently too and it is very easy to overlook things that other people see as being completely obvious.

That's why it is such a privilege to be part of a multicultural church; we can all help each other to understand the Bible and God's Character better.

From the Western way of thinking, Jesus' teaching on prayer stands out:

Matthew 6:5-9

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The big city near where Jesus grew up in Nazareth was called Sepphoris. It is never mentioned in the Bible, but in Jesus' time, it was a big, new, modern city, called "The Ornament of Galilee", with an amphitheatre, where actors came to put on plays. The word for actor was "Hypocrite" – it just means "someone playing a part"

At the time, religious Jews would memorise the Torah, and would tie boxes called Phylacteries on their foreheads and wrists. Some of them would then stand in very public places - synagogues and street corners, for hours and hours, praying really loud, so everyone would see how holy and pious they were.

What Jesus is saying here is don't **act** like you are holy; do what you are doing for God, not for people.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

" `Our Father in heaven,

“Babbling like pagans”, or “heaping up empty phrases like the Gentiles do” as another translation says (ESV) talks about how people used to address important people.

There is a letter written to the Emperor Constantine that starts like this:

“The Emperor Caesar, Galerius, Valerius, Maximianus, Invictus, Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Germanicus Maximus, Egyptian Maximus, Phoebicus Maximus, Sarmenticus Maximus (five times) Persecus Maximus (twice) Carpicus Maximus (six times), Armenicus Maximus, Medicus Maximus, Abendicus Maximus, Holder of tribunal authority for the twentieth time, Emperor for the nineteenth, Consul for the eighth, Pater Patriae Pro-Consul...”  
(Quoted by Kenneth E Bailey, p.92)

At the time, people would go over the top in referring to important people, praising them. Jesus says ‘Don’t do that with God; don’t think He will listen to you more if you flatter Him – just call Him Father.’”

The danger in the West is that we read these verses and miss the main point Jesus is making, which is don’t use your “goodness” to impress people; live your life for God’s eyes.

And we tend to hear the “Go into your room and shut the door and Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” part, and that can make us secretive and individualistic about our spiritual lives. And in the West, we then tend to separate off the part of our lives that is for God and done in secret, and call it a Quiet Time and have this as the measure of our spiritual lives.

And then, with our Western minds, we can think that if we are having a Quiet Time for an hour a day, and more or less behaving ourselves for the rest of the time, then that will keep God happy.

And I’ve done that many times! I have prayed and worshipped and read my Bible ... and then realised that there’s still 10 minutes to go, so I have prayed vague prayers just to run the time down, so I can then get out and have the rest of the day ‘doing what I want’! How crazy!!!

And how much less than what God wants for us!

This is not an Eastern view of life. In Eastern minds, everything belongs to God, so there’s no such thing as Sacred and Secular.

To show hospitality and to be with family and friends is a “spiritual” thing.

And although there were certain times of the day when Jews prayed, the Old Testament says lots about walking with God through all our lives – “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write (God’s Law) on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Dt 11:19); meditate on your beds through the night (Ps 119)...” Basically, weave God’s Presence into everything you do – Walk humbly with Him.

So am I saying that we don’t need to have Quiet Times?

No, because Jesus didn’t just teach us about prayer; He also demonstrated it.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. (Luke 6:12)

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. (Luke 4:42)

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. (Luke 11:1)

Is this because early mornings are more holy? I don’t think so.

I think that the reason Jesus had the habit of getting up early and going to quiet places was because He didn’t want to have to choose between prayer and people:

(Jesus) withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:13-14)

Jesus loved crowds and people – He was an Eastern Man; but He also valued times where He could be strengthened by the Presence of His Heavenly Father; where He could retreat from the bustle and be still, and know that God His Father was close.

And I think that to know God deeply, to be strengthened, to know God’s Love, do deepen our intimacy, times of quiet, alone with God, when no-one else is

watching, when we won't be tempted to put on a good show or pray really clever prayers to impress people, where we are just ourselves before our Father; just for Him; those times are so important.

So for a full life of prayer, whatever culture we are from, Withdrawing to pray is vital.

And if we want to bless the Church, we do it best with a living, deep relationship with God, where there are good, hidden, deep roots.

Someone said if we want to see what Jesus saw, we need to prepare as Jesus prepared.

Jesus' preparation – in secret, "Jesus grew in wisdom & stature"

You don't become a heavyweight champion of the world in the ring; you become it in the gym.

But in the West, because of this individual focus, I think we are sometimes in danger of keeping our spiritual walk so well hidden that people aren't really free to ask how things are going without it seeming like we are being nosey.

And we are in danger of thinking it's a personal thing between the individual and God.

In one region of Africa, the first converts to Christianity were very diligent about praying. In fact, the believers each had their own special place outside the village where they went to pray in solitude. The villagers reached these "prayer rooms" by using their own private footpaths through the brush. When grass began to grow over one of these trails, it was evident that the person to whom it belonged was not praying very much. Because these new Christians were concerned for each other's spiritual welfare, a unique custom sprang up. Whenever anyone noticed an overgrown "Prayer path," he or she would go to the person and lovingly warn, "Friend, there's grass on your path!"

(RWD Our Daily Bread, November 18, 1996)

Let's take responsibility and encourage each other and spur each other on, deeper and deeper towards faith and good deeds. We belong to each other as part of a Church family and as long as it is done in a godly way, full of encouragement; I think we should challenge and encourage each other to keep on growing.

But if Jesus teaching on prayer seems to focus on our individual lives of prayer, the rest of the New Testament, describing the life of the Early Church, normally talks about prayer as a thing the Church did together:

They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. (Acts 4:24)

Looking at this with western eyes, it is easy to miss how much prayer was something that happened when people were together – “They”.

And prayer was something they were devoted to together. Maybe this is something that is easier in a culture where community is more valued.

But actually, to be Biblical, we need both things to be part of our lives; we need to retreat, close the door, be solitary in order to get our roots deep down into our Father’s Love.

And we need to bring the security and faith and vision that we find there into our Church Family prayer times, so that as we gather we as a church – as the Body of Christ we can intercede and press on and take hold of God and extend his Kingdom together.

There are too many isolated Christians in this country & this city – doing their best, but on their own. I’ve heard too many people over the years talk about their own ministry or plod on, but not as part of a Church.

We need personal depth in our walk with God, but I believe that we advance as a Body in prayer – just as we have been learning with Janine; where we can stir each other in faith and encourage each other on. We are in a great place to help each other if our cultures have specific strengths and weak areas.

**Finish with prayer – repentance for individualism; repentance if grass has grown on our path; prayer for God’s Kingdom to advance.**