

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts
on prayer as part of 'Passionate Spirituality', 1st Mar. 2015**

Luke 11: 1-10

Last Sunday morning we reflected on: the results of our 8 Essential Qualities survey; our *strongest* qualities of Gift-based Ministry and Inspiring Worship; and started to look at the process of addressing our weakest characteristic of Passionate Spirituality. The image that's used in this process is that of a barrel where – no matter how high the other staves are – it's the shortest which determines how much liquid the whole barrel can store. The idea being: if we raise the lowest staff, then the other staves will better reach *their* potential. Let me just say 'thank you' to everyone who returned their thoughts about those results, and we have cards for your reflections again this week to put in the collection plate, hand to the vicar or send to the church office.

As I mentioned previously, two important aspects of passionate spirituality are personal prayer and reading the Bible. This week we'll explore prayer and next week Scripture.

Personal prayer is, by definition, 'personal' and Evelyn Underhill (one of the most insightful writers on prayer in the 20th century) has a lovely musical analogy. She speaks of prayer as a 'spiritual symphony' and writes: 'Since the vocation of each soul within that great symphony differs, and all are needed for the complete expression of the thought of God, we need not be surprised by the wide diversities or even apparent contradictions in practice which are found in the world of prayer.' She continues: 'We are not to criticize our neighbour's monotonous performance on the triangle, censure the first violin's deliberate silence, or look dubiously at the little bit of score we have received. All contribute to *one* music and this alone gives meaning to their prayer' (*The Love of God*, Barkway & Menzies [eds] p 124). So in that image, prayer is both a personal and a collective activity and we'll come back to Underhill's insights in a moment.

Prayer had a crucial role in Jesus' life and work. We see this most clearly in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is shown praying regularly and at critical moments in his ministry. Prayer becomes a mark of true discipleship, something that distinguishes the followers of Jesus. According Luke chapter 11 where Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, the *importance* of prayer emerges from the fact that it puts those who pray in touch with the incredible generosity of God. "Successful prayer" depends not on the methods or strategies of the disciples but on a listening Father, to whom petitioners are constantly referred.

Luke's account of the Lord's Prayer begins with Jesus *at* prayer – something that prompts the disciples to ask for instruction. What they receive is first a model prayer, then a parable that stresses the character of God, and finally reassurance that, as their heavenly Father, God will answer the petitions of God's children. Many books have been written about the meaning and implications of the Lord's Prayer and two observations are important for understanding Jesus' words about prayer. First, God's addressed as "Father," and thus the disciples are invited to pray with the same familiarity that Jesus prayed – abba, father, even 'daddy' (we might say). The fact that the one to whom they pray can be thought of in such an intimate way markedly affects the confidence with which *we* can offer our prayers.

Second, the Lord's Prayer is exclusively petitionary. In other words, it contains no adoration, thanksgiving, or confession, only five requests for God to do something. The disciples are being taught what their real needs are and to whom they need to go for satisfaction. God in turn is being asked to fulfil the promises previously made regarding God's name and reign and regarding the care and protection of God's people.

And the Lord's Prayer is followed by a parable about someone who has surprise visitors and goes round to a neighbour for some bread to offer the guests. This story makes sense only in light of the high value placed on hospitality in the Middle Eastern culture. Many people *travelled*, but most of the inns were disreputable so travellers had to depend on friends or friends of friends for lodging along the way. The parable asks a question: "Which of you will go to your next-door neighbour at midnight and ask to borrow bread for an unexpected guest and be turned down?" The anticipated answer would be, "Why, none of us. We don't have unresponsive neighbours. It's unthinkable such a request would be denied."

But this neighbour has excuses. In unbolting the door, he's bound to wake up the children, and there goes his sleep. Jesus observes: *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his **persistence** he will get up and give him whatever he needs.* The problem is there's little hint in the parable that the one with the unexpected guest **pestered** his neighbour. We're not told that he pounded on the door or called repeatedly.

He made a reasonable, not-out-of-the-ordinary request. So probably the Greek word translated here as "persistence" should be given its other meaning "shamelessness" or "avoidance of shame." So the neighbour responded, not because he was badgered, but because he feared the shame that would accompany his refusal. People in the community would talk if he denied a plea for help regarding hospitality. Better to risk waking the children than to face reproaches from villagers when they heard he'd refused such a request.

God's contrasted with the unfriendly neighbour. If the neighbour who's initially prone to refuse requests finally responds to avoid shame, how much more will God respond to our pleas? God can be trusted. Ask, search, knock, for God is not reluctant or hesitant. Prayer's rooted in the kindness and generosity of God, thus making it possible for even unworthy, stumbling disciples to offer petitions for their journey. What they receive, Jesus teaches, is the Spirit, the ultimate resource for journeys and for life. And the Holy Spirit too will come in different forms to different people, which brings us back to Evelyn Underhill.

In her analogy of prayer as a symphony Evelyn Underhill goes onto to quote Thomas á Kempis who said: 'This is all I ask or desire, that I may always laud and praise Thee.' And Underhill concludes that: 'Some will do this above all in the upward glance of an adoring worship, some by more intimate love, some by the small offerings of a devoted industry' (*The Love of God*, Barkway & Menzies [eds] p 124). So as we reflect upon the place of prayer in the ministry of Jesus and the Church let me leave you again with some questions to ponder:

- 1) What's your best form of prayer?
- 2) Where do we find God's different answers to our prayers?
- 3) How can we as a church better nurture that symphony of prayer?