

## *Sermon: Prayer & the Practice of the Presence*

I think it's time we talked about prayer again. Private prayer is a subject of some embarrassment to English people. It promotes the same queasy feeling as of having left undone a strategic row of buttons. But you don't have to put on a special voice. High rhetorical language is required for public worship and public space, but in your private prayers the more informal you are the better. Remember what Queen Victoria said about Gladstone: *He always addresses me as if I'm a public meeting*. You don't want to talk to God like that.

You don't need to strain to be grammatical. In fact you don't need words at all. St Paul speaks of prayer as our *inarticulate groaning*. And remember too Our Lord's words to his disciples: *Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him*. Ah yes, God understands what you *need*. And God also understands the difference between what you *need* and what you merely *want* – even if *you* don't. And God can only give you what you need when you've ditched this preoccupation with what you want; what you just might like.

Christmas is coming but our prayers mustn't be shopping lists. We shouldn't presume that we know what our needs are. Man proposes: God disposes. Or as someone put it, *If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans*. And when you find that quiet space each day and settle down to pray, don't feel that you have to appease God first or placate him. God is not the headmaster or some tyrannical official in the TV licence detector van.

God knows what we need. And we are made in Our Father's image, but there is one way in which we differ from him profoundly: we desire our own good, or what we foolishly imagine to be our good; God does not desire his good; he desires only our good – and he knows what our good is. What do we need? We need to be given the life of God himself. And, fortunately for us, God desires only to give himself to us completely.

We go around each day, imagining ourselves to be important little centres of interests, plans and ambitions. And like the pompous, pin-striped sort who thinks that by going to church he is doing God a favour, we might even allow God to have a little space in our interests, plans and ambitions. This is all wrong. We are not meant to be egos, precious little selves, centres of individual self-consciousness: we are meant to be glorious centres of God-consciousness.

God will do anything for us, anything that is for our good. But there is one thing that not even God will do – in fact by his own design and self-limitation, one thing he *cannot* do. God will never overrule our freewill. So for God to succeed in giving us what we need – that is in giving us himself – we have really to want to receive him. From our own perspective, this means that we have to practise the presence of God. Again as St Paul says, we must *Pray without ceasing*.

This does not mean affecting piety or that lugubrious born again grin – the sort of expression Mr Sowerberry might wear upon hearing he'd just won the National Lottery. To pray without ceasing means to attend to God's presence as he reveals this to us. But how does God reveal himself to us? Not very often with thunderbolts and lightning. But there is nothing vague or doubtful about God's revelation of himself – as if what you take to be God's visitation might really be the product of an undigested piece of cheese.

God is pure substance, the origin and sustainer of all there is. God reveals himself most definitely. He does this in a million ways but most often in what we might

describe as *little trinities*. He has done this since the story in *The Book of Genesis* when he appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre: when God in the form of three men met Abraham outside his tent:

*And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. And Abraham lift up his eyes and looked and lo, three men stood with him: and when he saw them he ran to meet them from the tent door and bowed himself toward the ground, and said, My Lord...*

Let me give you just one example of one of these *little trinities* in the hope that it might be some help to you in your daily prayers, that is in your practice of the presence of God. Think of God as a trinity of Beauty, Truth and Love.

So when suddenly the vision of a landscape, the shore, a mountain or the night sky wells up in you and you feel thrilled, overjoyed, this is God breaking through to you and supplying your need for his beauty. For the creation is beautiful only because God made it. For example:

*While the light fails on a winter's afternoon in a secluded chapel...*

There is God revealing his beauty. Another part of that little trinity is God's truth. God's truth likewise can break in on you and renew you when, as part of your private prayers, you contemplate one of the great Christian doctrines. Shut your eyes and think for ten seconds of how God intended and planned your eternal salvation before he had formed the earth and the sky.

But there is more to it than this. There are not *religious* truths and then *other* truths. God is truth and so all truths have their origin in God. And every truth is a revelation of God. Take for example something so commonplace you might think it banal: the truth that two plus two equals four. And that two plus two *always* equals four. And if it didn't, your life would not be possible. The truths about the universe, the truths of mathematics, are derived from God who is truth. Or as Galileo said: *mathematics is the language in which God has written the universe*.

And from beauty and truth to that third part of this little trinity, love. Here God reveals himself supremely too. But there is no competition among beauty, truth and love for they are all united in the inexpressible dance of the being of God. Love, think of love. Of a time or a person who has loved you. or even of your own stumbling small steps to escape yourself and give yourself in love to another. Or think of the love of Christ who said of his executioners *Father forgive them*. That love is there in the man mentioned on the back of today's Newsletter: Bishop Richard Norgate.

He went as a missionary to Tanganyika in 1954 and stayed there for the rest of his life where the soil is arid and infertile. The consequences of this are malnutrition and sometimes starvation. Richard Norgate identified himself closely with his parishioners, sharing their poverty and their hunger. He said that the larger Roman Catholic community in the diocese had often saved his life by providing him with food when his own had run out.

He was called *Daddy Norgate* by his parishioners. We are taught to call on God as *Abba*, Daddy. Bishop Norgate imitated the love of God. They say *He identified with his people*. God in his love identifies with us, even when, in Christ, this leads to his death.

O God fill our hearts with thy beauty, truth and love; and make us to abide with thee forever. Amen